ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Cents

May, 1948

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ard of Honor	FREDERICK HAZLITT BRENNAN
e "Baby" Cipher	W. A. DARLINGTON
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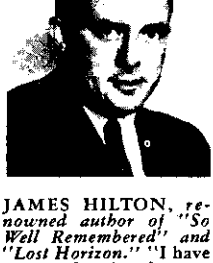

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZI

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK, *Publisher* • ELLERY QUEEN, *Ed*

570 LEXINGTON AVENUE, NEW YORK 22, N

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PUBLISHER: *Lawrence E. Spivak* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

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HOW TO WIN $100.00 . . .
AND HAVE FUN DOING IT!

EQMM'S COVER CONTEST — FOR READERS OF EQMM

Most of you have noticed that George Salter's cover designs for EQMM never had any connection whatever with the stories inside — or, as the legal phrase goes, any resemblance between a Salter cover and one of the stories selected by your Editor is purely coincidental. The reason for this lack of coordination between picture and text is really quite simple: Production difficulties make it necessary for the cover design to be drawn and plated long before the contents of each issue is definitely decided upon.

Now, one day our Managing Editor, Mildred Falk, got an idea. Why not, she asked, capitalize on this illogical state of affairs? Why not give our readers an opportunity to fictionize Mr. Salter's imaginative and gory crime pictures? It is an established fact that most dyed-in-the-blood fans have a secret yen to write detective stories themselves. Why not give them a chance?

No sooner suggested than done! Here's your golden opportunity to become a writer — golden to the tune of $100.00 in cash! All you have to do is write a short-short story — only three pages of manuscript! — about this month's cover. For the best story submitted we will pay $100.00 — and print the story in EQMM!

Here are the simple rules:

(1) The plot of your story must tie in closely with this month's cover.

(2) Your story must not exceed 1,000 words.

(3) The prize-winning story will be judged on the basis of aptness to the cover, ingenuity of plot, and smoothness of expression. The editorial staff of EQMM will serve as judges and their decision will be accepted as final; in case of ties, however, duplicate prizes will be awarded.

(4) Your entry must be postmarked no later than May 14, 1948 and the winning story will be published in our September issue, on sale August 9, 1948.

(5) No entries will be returned.

(6) The contest is open to everybody except employees of this publishing house and their relatives.

And one last condition, which is more a request than a rule:

(7) We ask all professional writers to please refrain from making submissions — their training and experience would give them too great an advantage. This contest is planned for amateur writers — for the detective-story fans to whom we all owe so much. Give them a chance to win!

Mail your story to: Ellery Queen's Cover Contest
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New York 22, N. Y.

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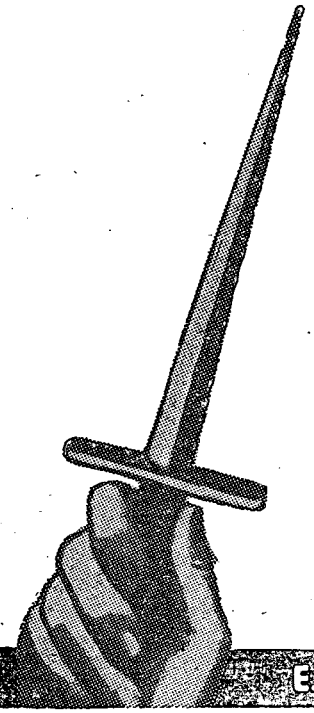
A DUTTON
GUILT EDGED MYSTERY

The first murder was fantastic enough even for a carnival . . .

The Dead Ringer



A stark naked midget was found in the freak tent, stabbed in the back — *and nobody in the show had ever seen him before.* The second murder (if you could call it that) was even more terrifying and inexplicable — *the victim wasn't even a human being.* The unorthodox sleuthing of Am and Ed Hunter finally halts the reign of terror. $2.50

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SECOND PRIZE WINNER: HUGH PENTECOST

On October 8, 1947 the Mystery Writers of America held one of their regular monthly meetings and were honored by the presence of Dr. Richard H. Hoffmann as guest speaker. Dr. Hoffmann, an eminent psychiatrist and consulting criminologist in many of New York's causes célèbres, *is probably the country's Number One Detective Story Fan. He reads 'em and he loves 'em, and we wouldn't be surprised if he prescribes 'em — for their psychiatric and therapeutic value; even more significant, Dr. Hoffmann has ambitions to write 'em, and one of these days we hope to publish a detective short story by Dr. Hoffmann in EQMM. It couldn't happen to a more deserving guy . . .*

But to get back to our 'tec-nology: in the course of relating some fascinating anecdotes of real-life crime-busting, Dr. Hoffmann mentioned the phrase "fourth degree." As you all know, the expression "third degree" means the extortion of an admission or confession by physical means. "Fourth degree" is a modern extension of that meaning: it denotes the extortion of an admission or confession by psychological means. The fourth degree is superior to the third degree in the same way that the use of mental power is more subtle than the use of brute force.

To most of those present the conception of fourth degree came as a new idea, a new thought, and it spread among the listeners like wildfire. Detective-story writers are always on the alert for a fresh angle — they know a good thing when they hear it. The reactions to Dr. Hoffmann's phrase manifested themselves to your Editor even before the meeting broke up. A well-known story editor, for example, in charge of the New York office of a major picture studio, remarked to us on his way out: "You know, we've had a piece of property under consideration and we just couldn't get a good title for it. Now we've got it! I'm going to call it 'The Fourth Degree'." And as the members of MWA left the meeting, we could see creative gleams in their eyes.

Less than two weeks later Hugh Pentecost submitted a story to EQMM's Third Annual Prize Contest. It was called "The Fourth Degree." How many other stories were written by MWA members, bearing the same title, and submitted to other magazines, we wouldn't know — but we'd bet an old clue there were more than a few.

Now, to the best of our knowledge, titles as such are not copyrightable. Different authors may use the identical title without being guilty of any in-

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fringement of copyright. (For example, in 1938 Ellery Queen titled one of his novels THE DEVIL TO PAY, *and a year later Dorothy L. Sayers complimented Queen by selecting the same title for one of her books.) So when a famous lecturer on crime projects a titular thought wave, writers the world over may tune into that wave length and pick up ideas to their hearts' content.*

But even more interesting is the true source of the phrase. Dr. Hoffmann attributed its invention to Elvin N. Edwards, former District Attorney of Nassau County, New York, who first used it, according to Dr. Hoffmann, in his summation in the celebrated Creighton-Applegate case. That trial took place in 1935. But while Mr. Edwards may have invented the term, it can be proved beyond shadow of doubt that he was not the first one to think of it. Eleven years before, in 1924, an English author, F. Britten Austin, first published a short story about his detective Quentin Quayne, better known as Q. Q., and this story was actually called "The Fourth Degree." And even this may not have been the earliest use on record.

So, while we cannot give Mr. Pentecost credit for the first use of a title, we can credit him with a much more important "first." "The Fourth Degree" is the first short story Hugh Pentecost has written about his popular and highly esteemed psychiatrist detective, Dr. John Smith — a seemingly colorless, anonymous-looking man who can probe a murder case until it hurts — the murderer.

THE FOURTH DEGREE

by HUGH PENTECOST

"I WOULD stand over the crib and look down at him," Harvey said, "and I would think how easy it would be to turn him over on his stomach and press his tiny face into the pillow until — until he was dead."

The room was dark except for the faint reflection from a street lamp outside. The reflection showed the outline of Paul Harvey sitting on the edge of a couch, his head buried in his hands.

"Go on, Mr. Harvey." It was a colorless voice that came from some invisible recess of the room. Harvey had spoken of an impulse to murder, but the voice reacted to it as unemotionally as if Harvey had been reading a want-ad in the newspaper.

Harvey turned his head from side to side. "I can't make it come together in the right order," he said. "It — it's all jumbled up."

"That doesn't matter," the voice said. "It's my job to put it together. Just go on, Mr. Harvey. You were talking about the impulse to smother your infant son."

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"It was when that got bad that I left Ellen," Harvey said.

"Ellen?"

"My wife," Harvey said. "I haven't told you about her yet, have I? I left her and turned to Ruby. It was the only place I had to turn." He twisted his body as though he were suffering from some physical agony. "Ruby was my secretary at Verne Steiger's. She's a strange girl — not like Ellen, or Lilli. Not like anyone I ever cared for before. We don't have the same tastes, but — well, I knew it would never happen with her. I was positive of that."

"'It' would never happen?" the voice asked.

"The same old thing," Harvey said. "Just the way it happened at Steiger's. I was head of the packaging department there. Do you know about Verne Steiger? She's the outstanding woman industrial designer in America. Very smart, very high-pressure. We were doing a tremendous business in my department — packages and labels for liquor, for perfumes, for drugs of all kinds, for foods and jewelry. I had twenty designers working under me. Then — it happened. Just as it's always happened."

The distant wail of an ambulance siren crept in and out of the dark room.

"Verne called me into her office one day. There was a man there. He was tall and sleek in a pin-stripe suit with padded shoulders. He looked like the vice-president of an advertising agency. Verne introduced me. She said the work was piling up. That I was doing a fine job, but the work was piling up. So, she said, she had decided to hire an assistant for me. Oh, it sounded plausible enough. But I knew. She had heard that I'd left Ellen. She'd heard about Ruby. This was her way of kissing me off. In a few weeks or a few months this 'vice-president' would have my job. I wasn't going to wait for that, you understand. I wasn't going to let it happen again. So — so I resigned." He was silent, except for his labored breathing.

"Didn't Verne Steiger try to persuade you to stay?" the voice asked.

"Oh, yes, she tried," Harvey said, bitterly. "She pretended that I was indispensable. But I knew. I knew this 'vice-president' was going to destroy my position, just as someone has always destroyed my position. Just as David destroyed it."

"David is the boy — your son?" the voice asked.

Harvey nodded. "I met Ellen in my senior year in college. She was — she was wonderful. The minute I saw her, I knew there'd never be anyone else for me. She had yellow hair — a little like Lilli's — and a lovely warm smile. Even the first time I talked to her I knew she understood me — that she understood how much I needed her. I'd decided to go into industrial designing even then. Ellen studied art. We both liked music — the same kind of music. We didn't have to amuse each other. We didn't even have to talk. We just knew about

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each other, that's all — and gave to each other.

"We were married, as soon as I'd graduated. There was some money — from Lilli, you understand. I got a job with Verne Steiger almost at once. We took a little house in the suburbs and I commuted to town. We were happy — so damned happy!" Harvey's voice broke. Then he drew a deep breath and went on.

"Very soon Ellen told me we were going to have a child. I could see how happy she was. She seemed to shine with it. I could feel the love pouring out of her to me. It was a wonderful period. I did so well at my job I was made head of the department. I had an office and a secretary of my own — Ruby!" He stopped again, and when he went on, the quality of his voice was dead.

"The child was born," he said. He suddenly beat one fist into the palm of his other hand. "It was a boy. We called him David. That day, *that very day*, I knew it had happened again. I'd lost Ellen. It was not *us* any more. She talked endlessly about David. She took care of him. It seemed as though we were never alone. At night she slept lightly, always listening for some sound from David in the next room. David was her life now. David! David! — Well, I began drinking. I couldn't stand it. I began missing my regular train. I didn't want to get home till David was asleep. But when I *did* get home she'd make me go in and look at him. I'd stand there, looking down at the crib, and thinking how easy it would be to steal in there during the night and turn him over and hold his face down against the pillow so he couldn't cry — so he couldn't make a sound. Hold him there until —" There was a long silence. "So I left Ellen. It had happened again. Just as it always happened. Just as it happened with Lilli."

"Who was Lilli?" the voice asked, casually, out of the darkness.

"Lilli? Why, Lilli was my mother," Harvey said, as though everyone should have known that.

"Ah, yes. Go on, Mr. Harvey."

"I never knew my father," Harvey said. "He was killed in the first world war. Lilli brought me up. We lived in the country. It's funny, but I can only remember her now in a long white evening dress, bending over my bed — close to me, her warmth near my face — the special fragrance that was hers. We did everything together. She used to read to me. We used to walk in the woods. We were never separated. I loved her — *so much!* Then — then *he* came." The last sentence was spoken with explosive violence.

"Go on," the voice said, calmly.

"His name was Daniel Steele. He was a lawyer connected with a firm that handled the small estate my father'd left Lilli. He'd known my father overseas. He was a big man, with a homely face and a kind smile. I — I actually liked him at first. But he began coming often and I knew from his attitude toward Lilli that it

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wasn't business. Suddenly he was taking a lot of her time. Well, he came to spend the Labor Day weekend with us. I remember Lilli coming upstairs to kiss me goodnight. Oh, she was very affectionate, very loving, but she seemed far away. She seemed nervous and excited. And she went downstairs where *he* was waiting for her. I could hear their voices downstairs, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was shut out — shut out as though I didn't belong at all!

"Suddenly it seemed to me I had to know what they were saying. I had to! I crept out of bed to the head of the stairs. I sat there, hugging the newel post, listening. *He* was talking! He was telling her that she should send me away to school. He was telling her that she was spoiling me, that I had to learn to stand on my own feet. He said boarding school would be good for me — that I should be separated from her so that I could learn to be an individual. Lilli sounded unhappy. She told him it would break my heart to be sent away. She knew! But he said I'd thank her for it later. And then — then she agreed." Harvey's voice sank so low it was almost inaudible. "I couldn't stand any more. I slipped back to my room — into bed. My world had come to an end. I rolled over on my stomach and sank my teeth into the pillow. I didn't want them to hear me crying."

"And did you go to boarding school?" the voice asked.

"Oh, yes, I went," Harvey said. "Lilli and Daniel Steele took me there. They were going to be married the next day and go on a honeymoon in the Caribbean. I hated it at school. I couldn't seem to get adjusted. All I could think of was *them* — together. Then — when I'd been there about three weeks, the headmaster sent for me. I knew I hadn't been doing well. But — but he didn't scold me. He — he seemed very upset. Finally, he showed me a newspaper that was lying on his desk. I read the headlines. AIR LINER CRASHES. PLANE STRIKES ALLEGHENY MOUNTAIN TOP. NO SURVIVORS. Right under the headlines was a little box containing a list of the known dead. The names seemed to jump out of the page at me. 'Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Steele.'" Suddenly Harvey's voice rose, harshly. "He had taken Lilli away from me. Taken her away forever!"

The voice was silent, waiting.

"So you see," Harvey said, after a while, "it's always happened. First *he* took Lilli away from me. Then David separated me from Ellen. Then the man at Verne Steiger's. And now — and now —"

"Did you murder Edgar Fremont?" the voice asked, as offhandedly as if he were inquiring about the correct time.

"No! *No!*" Harvey cried. Then his voice broke. "I — I don't think so."

"Tell me about Fremont."

"He — he was an egg-head," Harvey said.

"A *what*?"

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"An egg-head. That — that's a phrase of Ruby's. She always says she's not interested in Arrow-collar men. Interesting looking men, queer looking men are her dish. She calls them egg-heads. It's just a phrase."

"I see."

"When — when I left Verne Steiger's I decided to free-lance. I — I came here to live with Ruby in this apartment. It's her apartment, you understand. We — we don't have much in common in the way of pleasures, but we both like to drink in odd places — little bars along Third Avenue. One night, in one of those places, Fremont came in and sat down near us. He was short, with almost no neck, and very broad shoulders. It made his head look large for the rest of him. He looked kind of lonely and depressed. Ruby always likes to talk to strangers and we struck up a conversation. Fremont was shy at first, but finally he got talking. He was a writer, he said. He was writing a novel, and doing odd jobs to eat on while he worked at it. He didn't know many people. He didn't have any friends. Ruby and I felt sorry for him. We asked him to come around to see us — any time, we said.

"Well, he came — often. I liked him. He talked my language about books and art and music. We used to argue about things until Ruby got bored. She — she didn't have a feeling for things like that. So, Fremont used to eat with us often — and drop in to see us without waiting for an invitation. Then — then I began to notice. It — it was happening again. I could see that Ruby was falling for him. I had a quarrel with her about it — and others followed. I started to drink pretty heavily. Today was the pay-off. We had a terrible brawl. She — she told me to get out of here and not come back! I — I wasn't surprised, in a way. As I've told you, it always happens."

"But you did come back," the voice said. "You did come back here tonight."

"Not to the apartment," Harvey said. "Not till the police brought me up. You see — I was very drunk. I'd been drinking in a place down the street for hours. I was sitting in a little booth all by myself when, suddenly, Fremont was there. He slid into the seat opposite me. Things were all kind of blurred. He looked like a — like a monstrous little gargoyle sitting there.

" 'I've been looking for you everywhere,' he said to me.

" 'Go away,' I said.

" 'You've got to snap out of this,' he said. 'You're killing yourself, Paul. Ruby isn't worth it.'

" 'That's a funny thing for you to say,' I said.

" 'What do you mean, Paul?' he asked.

" 'I mean *you're* the reason Ruby and I have quarreled. There's no use pretending, Fremont. You're in love with her and you've taken her away from me.'

" 'In love with her!' I remember he

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started laughing. It sounded crazy. 'Ruby has nothing for me, Paul. Nothing! She has nothing for you, only you won't recognize it. You're killing yourself over a cheap little tart who'll leave you the minute she's bled you dry.'

" 'You can't talk that way about Ruby,' I said. But I wanted to believe he felt that way, do you understand? I wanted to believe it, because then — well, then it might not happen again, the way it always had.

"He stayed with me quite a while, telling me that I'd be better off without Ruby. It — it sounded just like Daniel Steele telling Lilli I'd be better off at school. Better off — with separation and death to follow. Finally, he left me. Then — then I got to thinking. Maybe he just wanted to make sure I wasn't seeing Ruby. Maybe he was going to see Ruby now, being certain I wasn't there. I had to know. I *had* to know. So I got out of there. I — I was drunker than I realized."

Again he paused to take a deep breath. "So — so I came over here to see. This — this old brownstone has a fire-escape leading down into a backyard. I guess you know that. I — I thought I'd go into the backyard and up the fire-escape. So I went around the back way and into the yard. I — I was stumbling around there in the dark when suddenly there were lights everywhere, and policemen, and they dragged me up here and — and Fremont was lying there on the floor with — with his face shot off. And they showed me my gun. *My* gun!"

"Your gun," the voice said. "And mud on the fire-escape from the backyard. And mud on your shoes from the backyard. Are you sure you didn't come up here?"

"I *was* sure," Harvey said, "before the police worked on me. I was sure. But I was very drunk. And — and maybe I forgot. I know about those things, doctor. I know sometimes, in a situation like this, you draw a blank. Maybe I drew a blank. Is — is that what you think?"

"No," the voice said.

There was the sound of a clicking light-switch and the room was flooded with light. It revealed Paul Harvey, slender, dark, his wavy hair damp with perspiration, his brown eyes hollow, haunted. The voice also took shape. The shape was that of a small gray man, an anonymous-looking gray man. No one would ever have turned to look at him on the street. There was nothing about him to arouse interest. He was just small, and gray, and neutral.

The gray man looked around the room, his eyes mild and thoughtful. It was a room that would have had no charm for a man of taste, a man such as Paul Harvey appeared to be. There was a daybed on one side of the room, stacked high with pale pink and green satin cushions. There was a goldfish bowl on a stand by the window with a waving green plant that grew under the water, and two sullen fish. There was a whatnot in one corner laden with souvenirs — sou-

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venirs from Coney Island and Broadway shooting galleries and Third Avenue junk shops. On the wall there were cheaply framed photographs of vacation incidents, intimate yet meaningless to a stranger. There was a reproduction of that tired Maxfield Parrish of the nude boy in a swing against the background of an unreal sky. On the mantelpiece was a stuffed toy panda, ten-cent-store variety, staring out at the room with shoe-button eyes.

The rug was a faded pink broadloom, except in the corner by the front door where there was a dark, irregular stain where Edgar Fremont had bled and died.

The gray man walked over to an inner door which led to the kitchen and bedroom. He opened the door.

"All right, Lieutenant," he said.

Three men came out of the bedroom: Lieutenant Mason of Homicide and two uniformed policemen. Mason was one of the department's bright young men — college degree, good clothes. He looked like a business executive.

"All right, boys, you can take him downtown," Mason said.

The two policemen moved in on either side of Paul Harvey and helped him to his feet.

"Just a minute," Harvey said. "Can I see her for a moment, Lieutenant?"

"Not now," Mason said.

"But I —"

"Not now!"

The policemen led Harvey out of the room. The sound of their feet on the stairs was plainly audible. The little gray man was standing by the window, looking down at the street.

"Well, Dr. Smith?" Mason asked, when they were alone.

Dr. Smith sighed. "God, what children suffer without their parents ever knowing!" he said.

Mason smiled to himself. He'd worked with Dr. John Smith before. He knew you didn't come at things directly with him. Mason remembered his first reaction to the little gray man; that he was the only person who could sign a hotel register 'John Smith' and be believed! Mason also knew how deceptive Dr. Smith's appearance was. Let the police give a crook a thorough going-over with all the approved third degree methods and fail, and then Dr. Smith would be called in. The motives for murder, he claimed, were to be found, not in bank balances or vaults, not in apparent jealousies or greed, but in the dark and inaccessible corridors of the mind. Searching those corridors, battling with words and ideas, Dr. Smith called "The Fourth Degree."

"I never get to talk to anyone," Dr. Smith said, turning from the window, "till you and your boys have reduced him to a state of abject terror, Mason. Some day you may wake up to the fact that the psychiatrist should be called in first, not last!"

"I just work here," Mason said, grinning. "What do you think about Harvey, Doctor?"

"What I think isn't evidence," Dr.

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Smith said. "And evidence is all you're concerned with."

"We've got plenty of evidence," Mason said. "We have the note Ruby Lewis left for Harvey before she went out to the Island for the weekend. Here, you haven't actually seen it." Mason took a letter from his pocket and handed it to Smith. The doctor slid on a pair of heavy, bone-rimmed spectacles.

"Paul:" the note began,

> I have had enough of your accusations and crazy jealousy of Edgar. I am going away for the weekend to the Island — The Lambert House. I expect you to have all your things moved out when I get back. This is final. Ruby

"The motive is clear," Mason said. "Harvey was crazy-jealous of Edgar Fremont. Fremont came up here and as he walked in the front door Harvey let him have it. Then he went down the fire-escape to the backyard where we found him — *and* the gun. His gun! Motive, opportunity, weapon."

"I understand there were no fingerprints on the gun?" Dr. Smith said.

"Naturally — he wiped them off," Mason said.

"Unnaturally," the doctor muttered to himself. "He wiped his fingerprints off the gun, so he wouldn't be caught — and then he waited in the backyard for fifteen minutes while neighbors called the police and they came here with sirens screaming, went upstairs, found the body, and finally — God knows how long afterwards — went down in the yard and found Harvey still waiting for them."

"He was drunk," Mason said. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"But he knew enough to wipe his fingerprints off the gun?"

Mason shrugged. "Everybody knows enough to do that."

The doctor shrugged. "Physical evidence is your department, Mason," he said. "You wouldn't have called me in unless there were some doubts in your mind."

Mason gave the little gray man a wry smile. "I felt sorry for Harvey," he said. "Can you beat that? I felt sorry for him."

"There's no reason to be ashamed of a decent human emotion," Dr. Smith said.

"All the evidence indicates that Harvey set a deliberate trap for Fremont. That he invited him here, laid in wait for him, and shot him when he arrived. That's first-degree murder and it means the chair. But somehow — well, of course if he were a mental case —"

"He isn't — in the legal sense," Dr. Smith said:

"Then that's that," Mason said, and sighed.

"Harvey's a man who has been living under the terrific pressures produced by a childhood trauma," Dr. Smith said. "It has influenced every relationship and every major crisis of his life."

"And finally drove him to murder," Mason said.

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"I'm not sure at all. Mason, you look for patterns on the surface — clues, fingerprints, alibis. I look for internal patterns. Harvey's is clear. Every time he's been confronted with a certain kind of situation — one in which it seemed that some woman who was close and dear to him was about to be stolen away by someone else — he reacted in exactly the same way. He ran! Now, if Harvey killed Fremont it means that pattern, which he has followed all his life, was suddenly altered. From all we know about him he should have run this time. But if he killed Fremont, he upset his whole behavior pattern. Why? *Why?*"

"I suppose there came a point when he just blew his top," Mason said.

"We have no right to suppose," Dr. Smith said. "At least, I have to know to be satisfied. Tell me something about the girl, Ruby Lewis."

"Not much to tell," Mason said. "She isn't your type — or mine! Or Harvey's for that matter. She's like this room — a sort of brightly tinted Easter egg in a ten-cent store. But she's in the clear. She was at the Lambert Inn all evening — thirty miles from here."

"I'd like to talk to her," Dr. Smith said. "Maybe she can tell us something about Harvey that will explain what we don't quite understand at the moment."

"No reason why you shouldn't," Mason said. "She's in the bedroom. Perhaps you'd better see her there. She has a natural reluctance to come in here. We showed her Fremont before we cleaned up the place. It was pretty rough."

"Let's get it over with," Dr. Smith said.

Mason started toward the door of the bedroom. "She's got a friend with her. Fellow named George Lambert who owns the hotel where she was staying. He drove her into town."

The bedroom was almost dark. The only light came from a dim, shaded lamp on the bedside table. It showed Ruby Lewis stretched out on the bed, dabbing at her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief. There was an almost overpowering scent of perfume in the room. Ruby had flaxen colored hair done in a feather cut that gave it the look of a curly halo — an artificial halo. Her complexion was peach ice cream. Her figure made it quite understandable why men should be instantly interested.

A man came over to stand in the circle of light from the lamp. He was tall and handsome in a sleek way. His clothes were a little too sharp, and he wore a checkered vest such as horsemen sometimes wear in the field.

Mason introduced Dr. Smith to Ruby and George Lambert.

"I've heard about you, Doc," Lambert said. "The Madden case. I knew Senator Madden's son. You pulled him out of quite a hole."

"You own the Lambert House where Miss Lewis was staying tonight?" asked Dr. Smith.

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"That's right, Doc. And that's only the beginning. I'm planning a chain of hotels."

"Dr. Smith wants to ask a few questions," Mason said. Obviously he was annoyed by Lambert's breezy manner toward the doctor.

"Sure, sure," Lambert said. "Ruby and I got nothing to hide. Our alibis stand up, don't they, Inspector?"

"Lieutenant," Mason said, sharply. "Yes, they stand up, Mr. Lambert."

With a cheerful smile which indicated he was ready for anything, Lambert turned to where Dr. Smith had been standing. Dr. Smith wasn't there. He had melted somewhere into the shadows of the room.

"I think Dr. Smith wants to hear your story, Miss Lewis," Mason said.

Ruby lifted the lace handkerchief to her eyes. "It's awful," she said. "To think that if I'd called a doctor for Paul long ago this might not have happened."

Her voice was disillusioning. It sent the curve of her charm dipping sharply downward. It was flat, complaining.

"There's no doubt in your mind that Harvey killed Fremont?" Dr. Smith's voice came from a dark corner of the room.

"He was insanely jealous," Ruby said. "He was jealous of all men but he was insanely jealous of Edgar."

"You wouldn't believe it, just meeting him," George Lambert said. "He seemed like such a quiet guy."

"You broke off with Harvey today, didn't you, Miss Lewis?"

"It was final today," she said. "But it's been coming for a long time. We had a stinker of a quarrel last night about Edgar. This morning, after Paul went to his studio to work, I thought it all over. I decided that was that."

"So you left the note for him and went down to Mr. Lambert's hotel?"

"I had to get hold of my nerves," Ruby said. "George had told me to come any time I wanted."

"Did anyone else have a key to your apartment besides Harvey?"

Ruby pushed herself up on her elbows and peered into the dark. "What kind of a girl do you think I am?" she demanded, indignantly.

"I have no idea, Miss Lewis," the doctor said. "That's why I asked."

"I was strictly on the level with Paul!" she said. "But he was insanely jealous, just the same."

"So you said. You went out to the Lambert House by train?"

"Do I look like I owned a Rolls Royce?" Ruby said, still angry. She lowered herself to the pillows again. "Will they electrocute him or just put him away somewhere?"

Mason answered that one. "It was clearly a premeditated crime. That means the chair."

"For someone," said the colorless voice from the corner of the room.

Ruby sat bolt upright on the bed. "You mean you don't think it was Paul? Why, they caught him here — it was his gun — he was insanely jealous of Edgar. He —"

"It's just that I have to make the

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internal facts fit the external facts," Dr. Smith said. "I'd like to know whatever you can tell me about Edgar Fremont, Miss Lewis."

Ruby's voice took on a peculiarly harsh quality. "He was going places," she said. "Everyone said he was going to be a really important writer. He just sold his book to one of those book clubs — and Hollywood. He was going to be rich and famous."

"He didn't like you, did he, Miss Lewis?"

"You wouldn't think that if you heard the way he tried to break things up between me and Paul. He was always trying to break things up between me and Paul."

"He wanted you for himself?"

"Why would he try to break things up between me and Paul if he didn't?"

"There could be other reasons."

"Look, Doc, take it easy," George Lambert said. "Ruby don't have to take that kind of a going-over from no one. What other reasons could the guy have?"

"Maybe he liked Harvey," Dr. Smith said. "Maybe he thought it would be good for Harvey if he went back to his wife and child."

"There wasn't anything stopping Paul, if that was what he wanted," Ruby said. "Paul didn't want anything but me. He said over and over he'd never let me go."

"He threatened you?"

"He acted crazy. He said he couldn't stand it if anything happened between us. He acted like it was a matter of life and death."

"It turned out to be a matter of life and death, didn't it?" the doctor said, quietly. "Were you afraid of him?"

"I tell you, he acted crazy!" Ruby said.

"Of course she was afraid of him," George Lambert broke in. "She told me about it one weekend when they were at my place. I told her she could call on me any time Harvey got out of line."

"If I hadn't known I could call on George I'd have been half out of my mind," Ruby said. She looked up at Lambert who was fingering the edge of his gaudy vest.

"What attracted you to Paul Harvey in the first place?" Dr. Smith asked.

"I was his secretary. Everyone said he was going places. He was one of the best designers in the business. I figured he'd become a partner of Verne Steiger's."

"But you stayed with him after he left Steiger's?"

"Well, I didn't think he was going to just quit and drink himself to death. I figured he'd start a business of his own."

"So you only stayed with him because you thought he had a successful future?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Ruby demanded. "A woman has a right to expect something from a man, doesn't she?"

"And if he doesn't produce it?"

"You have to look out for yourself," Ruby said. "That's why I

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finally broke off with him."

"I thought it was because you were afraid of him."

"That, too. He acted crazy about Fremont, I keep telling you."

"And there was no reason for his acting that way because Fremont didn't want you," Dr. Smith said.

"That stuck-up jerk!" Ruby said. "He didn't think I was good enough for him — or Paul either!"

There was a long silence and then the voice came from the corner of the room once more. "What are your plans now, Miss Lewis?"

"Plans?"

"Your affair with Harvey is over. What now?"

"I don't know that's any of your business!" Ruby said.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, baby," George Lambert said. He turned toward the direction of the voice. "Ruby and I are going to be married, Doc. It's time she had some of the things out of life she wants."

"It might be rather costly for you, Mr. Lambert."

"Nothing's too good for Ruby," Lambert said.

The doctor came out of the darkness and stood in the circle of light, looking down at Ruby. "A perfect epitaph for Miss Lewis, I should say."

"Now look, Doc —" Lambert's voice was angry.

Dr. Smith ignored him. "I have the feeling Miss Lewis usually gets what she wants. Of course she failed once."

Ruby sat up. "I don't like the way you talk to me," she said. She looked at Mason. "Do I have to stand for these cracks, Lieutenant?"

"She missed out on Hollywood and the glamorous position of being a successful author's wife. You wanted Fremont pretty badly, didn't you, Miss Lewis, and he laughed at you."

George Lambert took a step forward and dropped his big hand on Dr. Smith's shoulder. "That'll be about all from you, Doc," he said.

"Oh, I'm quite through," Dr. Smith said. "But I don't imagine you'll sleep very well at night, Lambert — after you're married."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if the chain of hotels is a little slow in coming about —"

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Lewis might be disappointed."

"So?"

"She doesn't like to be disappointed, Mr. Lambert. Harvey disappointed her, and he's in a very bad spot. Fremont disappointed her, and he's dead. It seems to be extremely unhealthy to disappoint Miss Lewis."

Ruby's voice rose shrilly. "Make him stop talking that way, Lieutenant! I'll sue him! He's got no right to talk that way. I'll —"

"Alibis are not my province," Dr. Smith said, his gray eyes fixed steadily on George Lambert. "I don't know what's wrong with Miss Lewis's alibi, Lambert. But I do know I wouldn't be in your shoes for a million dollars. As a psychiatrist I know that people are driven by repetitive compulsions they can't control. Harvey was a

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man who always ran away from disaster — before it happened! He actually made it happen by running away. He ran away from the danger of Fremont by drinking."

"What's all that long-haired talk got to do with me?" Ruby demanded.

"Your pattern is more aggressive, Miss Lewis. You want money and position, and you keep after it — first an important designer, then an important writer, now a chain of hotels. What next, Miss Lewis? And how will you get rid of Lambert when the time comes to move on and up?"

Lambert moistened his lips. "Get *rid* of me?"

"I hope for your sake the chain of hotels is a pretty sure thing," the doctor said, "and that it makes you a great deal of money. Otherwise —"

Ruby sat up on the bed, shrieking. "Get that filthy old jerk out of here! Get him out of here! Get him out!"

"We're going, Miss Lewis," Dr. Smith said. He turned to Lambert once more. "Good luck to you, Mr. Lambert. I have a feeling you're going to need it. Come, Mason."

"Wait!" Lambert said and his voice shook. "You — you think she killed Fremont and — and threw the blame on Harvey?"

"I think it's within the framework of her pattern, Mr. Lambert. I think she is capable of it. But — well, she has an alibi. So, of course —"

Beads of sweat glittered on Lambert's forehead. "Lieutenant," he said to Mason, "I — I think I'd like to alter my original statement."

A torrent of screaming abuse came flooding out of Ruby's twisted red mouth. Lambert backed slowly away from the bed toward the door.

" '. . . it isn't that I lied, you understand,' " Mason read aloud from the typewritten pages of George Lambert's new statement, " 'it's just that I didn't tell you everything. Ruby did arrive in the late afternoon and she went to her room, and she was there when you phoned at midnight. What I didn't tell was that she asked to borrow my car so she could go to the movies in town. I let her take the car and I didn't think anything of it until I was driving her to New York after your call. Then she said, 'George, maybe it would be easier for me if you didn't tell the police I went to the movies.' I asked her why, and she said everyone connected with Harvey would be under suspicion and if I didn't tell about her going to the movies she'd have a perfect alibi, and she wouldn't be bothered by the cops. I didn't see any harm in that because I knew — that is, I *thought* I knew — that she was in the clear. I still think she is, but I thought you ought to have all the facts.' "

Dr. Smith was standing by the windows in Mason's office, looking down at the street where the first early morning traffic was beginning to roll.

"There's not much doubt about it," Mason said. "She still contends she went to the movies — a double feature. But she's got an extraordinary

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lack of memory about those two pictures. The three hours involved was ample time for her to drive to New York, kill Fremont, and get back to the Lambert House without rousing suspicion. She probably had a date with Fremont . . . and he kept it because he wanted to help Harvey. But there's one thing that bothers me, doctor. Why? She didn't have to kill Fremont to get rid of him. He wasn't in her way."

"I'm bad on quotations, particularly corny ones," the doctor said. "But there's something somewhere about the anger of a woman scorned — Fremont had rejected her. Harvey had failed her and would probably make any new relationship extremely difficult. It was a perfect scheme for paying off the one and getting rid of the other."

Mason nodded. "What made you think Lambert would break?"

Dr. Smith turned away from the window. There was a faint smile on his lips. "That checkered vest," he said. "That vest, Mason, matched Ruby Lewis's living room, with the toy panda and the goldfish. They went together like ham and eggs. It occurred to me, without knowing much about Lambert beyond a surface character reading, that he and Ruby were birds of a feather. I was pretty certain Lambert would be much more interested in himself than in any woman, no matter how attractive. He was the male counterpart of Ruby, selfish, greedy, self-centered."

"What made you think Ruby's alibi was phony?" Mason asked.

"It's just the different points of view from which we work, Mason," Dr. Smith said. "You accept the outward physical facts as unassailable, and you make the internal facts fit them. My approach is just the reverse. I believe the internal facts are unassailable. The internal truth about Harvey made me certain he would run, not kill. That left Ruby or Lambert, both of whom were quite capable of killing. Ruby seemed the most likely to me because she had the most to gain — revenge for a jilting and a failure, a chain of hotels, and a man of her own kind."

"So much for scientific crime investigation," Mason said, dryly.

"You think the study of crippled personalities isn't a science?" Dr. Smith asked.

Mason pushed back his chair and stood up. "God forbid I should make such a claim," he said. He punched out his cigarette in the ashtray on the desk. "I'd like to ask you one more favor, doctor."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to go with me while I break the news to Paul Harvey that he's free," Mason said. "He's had a pretty rough time. He has a wife and a child and a real talent, and I think there must be some way we could help him to rehabilitate himself."

"Of course I'll go with you," Dr. Smith said. "It's time Harvey stopped being afraid of ghosts."

"And that," Mason said, "holds for most of us."

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ACTOR'S BLOOD

by BEN HECHT

THE death of a famous actress is the signal, as a rule, for a great deal of maudlin excitement. The world that knew her rushes up on that last stage where she lies with her eyes sincerely closed and joins, as it were, in her death scene, posturing and poetizing around her bier like a pack of amateur mummers. For a few days everyone who knew her is a road company Mark Antony burying her with bad oratory. The stage is a respectable and important institution, what with its enormous real estate holdings, but we still patronize an actress, particularly a dead one.

Marcia Tillayou's death let loose an unusual amount of "Alas, poor Yorick" poses among the laity because she was found in her apartment one summer morning with three bullets, all of them through her heart. This struck everybody as almost too rich a scenario to believe, that so glamorous, beautiful and witty a woman should add murder to the excitement of her dying.

We who were her friends were not exactly delighted. But there's no denying the thrill that lay in that dénouement. Even to her intimates the whole business of mystery surrounding that dead and beautiful body seemed more dramatic than real, seemed more a performance than the ending of a life.

As for the Press, it was honestly and naively grateful. It is seldom that an interesting, let alone famous, woman gets murdered. Our murder victims are in the main the dullest and most depressing of stooges. The best that tragedy has to offer the city editors is an occasional chorus girl and more rarely someone sufficiently well dressed to warrant the word Society in the headlines.

Marcia's exit kept the presses roaring. There was inexhaustible color to the mystery, and there was more bad writing and idiotic sleuthing than had distinguished the news columns for some time — a month at least. A life-sized portrait of Marcia as Pierrette hanging over the "murder bed" had been slashed across the middle. The furniture of the gaudy room had been smashed. Her satin hung dressing table with its glass top and hundred perfume bottles had been demolished. All in all it looked as if Marcia had been done to death by a herd of bison. But the police and the newspapers chose to regard the attendant ravages as the work of a Love Fiend.

Since these matters and all the clues and surmises of that first week came to nothing there's no point in dwelling on them. My story of the Marcia Tillayou mystery is, as a mat-

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ter of fact, not part of any police record nor is it to be found in the newspaper files.

At the time of Marcia's death there was one who wept more than all the rest, who ranted more, postured more and seemed more humanly objectionable than any of the mourners who carried spears to her funeral. This one was her father, Maurice Tillayou, a Thespian hero of other days, an ancient theatrical windbag with a soul still full of grease paint and obsolete bravado.

Old actors are perhaps the greatest bores in the world, particularly old actors whose day is past and whose very agents no longer carry their telephone numbers in their records. Tillayou was of this tribe, and so much the actor still that he could never seem the man again on the stage or off.

This rubbery faced son of bombast had had his heyday at the turn of the century. He had strutted his little hour as one of those barrel voiced, fur collared, blue skinned tragedians of whom our fathers, forgetting their names, still mumble with pretended delight.

Unlike many of his generation, old Tillayou had never adjusted himself to the growing realism of the theater, never tried to soothe his grandiloquent antics to fit the more prosaic tempo of the modern stage. As a result, at fifty, he had almost vanished from the boards; at sixty, he had become one of those myths who cling to some dimly lighted corner of a theatrical club drinking bitterly to the death of art and the venality of managers.

He who had played all the Great Rôles — Hamlet, Lear, Romeo, Jekyll, Monte Cristo, Richelieu, Ben Hur, St. Elmo and Quo Vadis among them — sat in the shadows without a part, as if not he alone but all the swaggering, thundering heroes in whose shoes he had paraded shared his exile. He was given, because of this quaint delusion, to rolling his eyes, working his shaggy brows with mystery and wrapping himself in a peculiar sort of phantom dignity. He spent the day in sonorous complaints against destiny and like all discarded actors was full of an offensive egoism.

There was nonetheless a slightly exciting air about Tillayou, soiled and musty though he was. His whispy gray and yellowish hair rose from his mottled scalp like the whiskers of a cat. He wore an old fashioned standup collar into which he could have retreated turtle fashion had he so desired. His clothes were as ill-fitting as a waiter's or perhaps a philosopher's. His massive face seemed in repose to be folded up and able to open like an accordion. But bore though he was, didactic and misinformed on almost every human topic, his mind as disheveled as his garments, he had about him the charm of authenticity. He seemed more "theater" than a hundred electric signs. He seemed, with his tiresome boasts, his rumbling voice, his pompous mannerisms and over-plastic face like some lost puppet playing truant from those theatrical

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storage houses in which the thousand and one forgotten kingdoms of the stage are stacked away.

During the years I knew him I saw him in harness but three times. A Restoration drama revival brought him before the public for a few weeks and once, under the wing of a profit sharing actors' enterprise, he blossomed briefly and rather foolishly as Richelieu. For, removed from under its bushel, the old Thespian's genius, alas, set no rivers afire. Tillayou emerging from the shadows of exile brought with him all his retinue and was never content with the mere acting of the rôle on the program. He sought to dazzle as well with a dozen other remarkable characterizations of which he was equally master.

The third time I witnessed his performance was the occasion of the anecdote I've set out to relate.

Marcia Tillayou became a star when she was twenty-five. This means a great deal in the theater. It is, as a rule, the reward more of personality than of talent. You must be distinctive and have a new pattern of vocables and gestures to offer. You must have a peculiar voice, it may be inaudible as a conspirator's or incoherent as a train announcer's, but this matters very little providing it has any peculiarity at all — barring adenoids. You must have a set of mannerisms to keep you from being submerged in any characterization, and a certain high handed way of playing all your parts alike, whatever the dramatist has written or the director demanded.

Marcia had been playing Marcia Tillayou for some eight years, most of them on Broadway, playing this peculiar young lady consistently and with infatuation, when rather abruptly one evening her persistence was rewarded. She had stumbled upon a part even more Marcia Tillayouish than herself — a waspish tongued, brittle spirited creature of disillusion invented by Alfred O'Shea — a woman whose green eyes shone with wit and despair, whose gestures were tense with ennui and who, in the play, loved, jested and died like a glass of champagne going stale.

Through the medium of that particular drama which was called *The Forgotten Lady* audience and critics beheld Marcia Tillayou for the first time as dozens of intimates already knew her, and this enlarged recognition of her personality made her a star. It was a tremendous début and all who witnessed it knew that ever after, whatever fortunes befell, however many bad plays and adverse criticism came her way, her stardom was fixed; she would always be one of that handful of women of the stage who are an Electric Sign in fair weather or foul.

Marcia Tillayou's emergence as a star was not the only dramatic event of that evening. There was also Maurice Tillayou's emergence as a father. This happened shortly after the last curtain fell.

There was a reception in Marcia's dressing room. Nobody in the world,

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except perhaps nursery dolls, receives such concentrated and overwhelming flattery as does an actress on the night of a Great Success. The theater touches off the facile emotions and its heroes and heroines come in for blasts of adulation which would terrify more realistic souls.

Maurice Tillayou was present at this back stage coronation in Marcia's dressing room. He stood in a corner, a soiled and musty unknown, his eyes glittering at the sight of the makeup boxes, the mirrors, hangings, strewn finery and heaped floral offerings; his ears tingling with the praises showering the head of his daughter. He lurked silently in the corner until the ecstasies had subsided and the last of the bandwagon soloists drifted out of the room. Then he came forward and, for the first time in the memory of either, kissed his daughter. His eyes shone with tears and he added his gift to the triumph of that evening.

"You are a great artist," he said in capitals, "you have taken your place tonight in the great tradition of the stage beside the immortal figures of Rachel, Siddons, Bernhardt and Modjeska. May I have the honor to congratulate you, my child?"

He said this all very glibly and sonorously as was his habit, but in a strange way this pronouncement of her hitherto boring and negligible parent excited Marcia. Regarding the old windbag with her tired but always witty eyes, she felt the deeper meaning of his words. He had come offering her his egoism, that battered, offensive and useless egoism which had sustained and applauded him when all other palms had grown silent. He too had undergone a transformation this night. He was no longer Maurice Tillayou, the star, albeit in temporary eclipse; but old Tillayou, father of a star newly risen. Holding her hands and kissing her the old gentleman seemed to Marcia to be letting go forever his treasured career and passing on to her, twenty-five years after her birth, some gaudy, hereditary talisman of genius.

The story of Marcia's nine years of stardom is a tale that wants a longer telling than this. It was the career of a high heart in a higher mind. To those who kept pace with her or contributed to her life she seemed as complicated as music by Stravinsky, as troublesome as a handful of fine but broken glass. She owned an acidulous mind and a school girl's heart. She was ironic and disillusioned, yet ineptly romantic. She was always beautiful. Her hair shone as if a light were concealed in her coiffure. Her green eyes were never without comment — amusement, derision. Her skin was pale, her mouth wide and mobile, with restless lips. And, as in women of personality, her face seemed bolder, more strongly modelled than suited her taut, slender body. Her crisp voice was an instrument for wit rather than sighs, and her beauty, despite her reputation, was a thing of which men seldom thought lightly. There was too much character and epigram behind it. Clever people have

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a way of seeming always gay and this was Marcia's manner — to jest at scars, her own or others'. Her sprightliness, however, was disconcerting, not only because of the cruelty it contained but for the fact that in her very laughter lurked always the antonym of weariness.

Throughout the nine years of her stardom Maurice Tillayou hovered in the background of her affluence, intrigues and follies. He lived elsewhere but was to be seen often at her dinner table, drinking his wine with a faraway happy stare at the Maestros, Savants, Journalists and Heroes of the Pen and Stage who graced his daughter's board. He was still a musty old dodo but full of punctilio and reticence.

What there could be in common between this ghost of the theater and the glamorous daughter whom he haunted no one was able to make out, except that she obviously supported him and that he doted on running errands. Marcia's life seemed hardly fit for such continual parental observation, but there he was peering continually from behind his high, stand-up collar at this legendary world of which he had always dreamed. He lingered in the background, saying nothing that anyone heard, through Marcia's hysterical marriage with Alfred O'Shea, author of her first success, *The Forgotten Lady*, and through that scoundrel's subsequent hegira with Reena Kraznoff, the dancer; and through a dozen liaisons and entanglements all of them full of heartbreak and hysteria. For Marcia was one whose heart clung to illusions that had no place in her bedroom, and who bought her counterfeit pleasures with genuine coin. Like many of the stage she bargained desperately for beauty and took home tinsel.

Old Tillayou was somehow involved in all these unfortunate doings of his daughter. And though Marcia suffered no social blemish from her wanton antics, her father seemed to lose caste, to become a sort of paternal gigolo.

Yet however bedevilled by her wit, reduced by her sins or made the butt of her reminiscences maliciously remembered from childhood, Tillayou remained always charmed by her presence. She treated him as if he were some eccentric toy to which she was playfully attached. Yet this once most touchy of Hamlets seemed immune to her belittlements. He would smile at her sallies and add a bit of trenchant data to her tales and remain, in a way that touched the hearts of those inclined to notice him at all, respectful and idolatrous. He was, in short, a musty old spectator basking in a corner of his daughter's glamor.

The year and a half which preceded her mysterious death had been a troublesome time for Marcia. A reverberating set-to between herself and Phil Murry, her producer, had resulted in the closing of the play she was in. There had followed a short-sighted jump to a rival producer, a

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hasty production under his banner and an equally hasty flop. A second appearance under the management of the gifted Morrie Stein had resulted in another failure. And Marcia found herself verging toward that second stage of stardom in which the star, unexpectedly and as if bedevilled by witches, develops play trouble. Still glamorous, still a great box office draw, she floundered through productions that set critical teeth on edge.

That alchemistic combination which makes for success on Broadway is a tenuous one. Its secret often evaporates, leaving no visible change in the ingredients, except that the gold is gone. And sadly there rises for these stars confronted with empty seats the first bewildering breath of limbo. All this was beginning to happen to Marcia. There was no belittlement of the name Tillayou. It was still an Electric Sign but growing ghostly, slipping, still aglow, into the side streets of fame.

At this time, too, Marcia's finances came in for ill luck. Yet with a falling market and diminishing salary checks, her extravagances continued. Credit took the place of money. To the clamor of friends and lovers on the telephone were added the appeals of tradesmen, dressmakers, landlords and even servants. It was a stormy period and full of those thunders and lightnings with which temperament, thwarted, manages to circle its head as an antidote.

During these months old Tillayou's importance increased. It was he who led the talk in the dressing rooms after each new disastrous first night. He was an encyclopedia of alibis. Where, he wanted to know, had they got such a leading man, so horrible and unpractised a fellow? He had, said Tillayou, ruined the two major scenes. And where, he wanted to know again, had they discovered the Character Woman? How could a play mount with such a bungling amateur hanging on to it? The set, he was quick to point out, had killed the third act completely. And the rain, he was certain, had depressed the audience. The lighting in the love scene had been atrocious; the director had garbled the first act curtain. But Marcia had been and was always wonderful, superb as ever, giving the best performance he had ever seen any woman offer on the stage. Moreover he was quick with that final solace — that it was weak plays such as this which made the best vehicles for great stars, that it was in such as these that they personally triumphed.

Papa Tillayou stood at the pass like some valorous Old Guard. He knew, alas, all the thousand and one excuses for failure, all the quaint, smug, fantastic box office circumlocutions which in the theater deaden the sting of defeat. And his voice rumbling, his eyes glowing with their best Hamlet fires, he fought these dressing room Thermopylaes, a veteran forsooth.

In the excitement of Marcia Tillayou's murder, Maurice Tillayou

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lapsed into complete shadowiness. He had been observed at the funeral carrying on like a Comanche, bellowing with grief and collapsing on the wet ground not once but a dozen times. He had ridden back alone to his bailiwick in Washington Square. And here Maurice Tillayou had remained in seclusion while sleuths and journalists played bloodhound through Marcia's life in quest of the villain who had sent three bullets through her heart.

This made fascinating reading and sophisticated dinner table talk for the Broadway *cognoscenti.*

Although the police were baffled, God knew and so did some hundreds of New Yorkers who are nearly as omniscient, that there had been material enow in Marcia's life for a whole series of murders. Marcia's career had been interwoven with the careers of equally electric names, names which live in a sort of fidgety half public undress and seem always but a jump ahead of the thunderclap of scandal. We waited excitedly for the hand of the law to fall on one of these — for who could have murdered Marcia more logically than one of those who had been part of her life?

First in our suspicion was Alfred O'Shea, who had married her once and who at her death was still legally her husband. This tall, dark, prankish chevalier, Don Juan, playwright, wit, over-charming and malicious, full of grins, *bon mots* and moody withal as a beggar on a rainy day, was a most obvious suspect to us, his friends. His strong Irish-Castilian face held a jester's nose, pointed and a bit awry, held cold, centered eyes and a gaunt muscular mouth and a promise of high deeds — murder among them. We knew his story well enough. Absurdly infatuated with his Reena, a dancer with a lithographic face and an accent full of charm and faraway places, he had abandoned Marcia and set up a clamor for divorce. Marcia had refused, loathing, she said, to hand him over to so belittling a successor, and we remembered hearing of times this over-charming Celt, drunken and vicious, had broken into Marcia's bedroom threatening to have her heart out unless she released him. What bourgeois trait, what subterranean wiliness inspired Marcia to step so out of character and thwart this man whom she had so desperately loved, I could never make out. She had only jests for answers.

But O'Shea was in a goodly company of suspects, those first weeks of the mystery. There was also Phil Murry, the producer — cool, round faced, paunchy with a homely chuckle and a little piping voice, all very deceptive qualities, for Mr. Murry was as treacherous as a cocklebur to wrestle with. He was a maestro as famous for his unscrupulousness with women as for his hits.

Marcia had been his mistress until supplanted by Emily Duane, long considered her closest friend. La Duane, an Electric Sign in her own right and a vest pocket edition of

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Duse, cello voiced and full of a deceptive ingenue wholesomeness, had jockeyed Marcia completely out of Murry's life — his theater as well as his arms. We remembered poor Marcia's to-do over Murry's faithlessness, her involved campaign of retaliation — a matter of social ragging and continuous public baiting which had driven that paunchy maestro out of his mind on a number of occasions and reduced Emily to a sort of humorous female Judas in our eyes. How these two had hated Marcia and what vengeance they had sworn against her poor, sad wit!

There was also the grayish, Punchinello-faced Felix Meyer, theatrical lawyer de luxe as he called himself — glib and of the old school as his redundant phrases and ancient cravat testified. This elderly bravo was a species of liaison officer between Broadway and a mysterious world of reality called the Law. But to that world he found it seldom necessary to resort. For, immersed in the thousand and one secrets of the theater, his practice was in the main a species of affable blackmail and counter-blackmail — his activities as arbiter, backer, judge and Don Juan being only dimly sensed by his intimates, and not at all by his wife.

His affair with Marcia had been an unusually gritty one, based in her inability to pay him an exorbitant legal fee for services rendered. It had lasted several months and left both of them with a horror of each other. Lawyer Felix went about in terror lest Marcia, out of spite, betray him to his wife, to whose name he had with foolhardy caution transferred all his holdings. And Marcia, aware of his craven fidgets, had time and again promised to do just that. How relieved this glib and accomplished fellow must have felt that first moment reading of her death, and how full of disquiet he must have sat while the bloodhounds scurried through Marcia's life sniffing for clues.

There was also Fritz von Klauber, who had painted Marcia as Pierrette, a dapper gentleman of the arts with a mandarin mustache and a monocle to help him intimidate the less fortunately born theatrical producers (a rather numerous set) for whom he devised unusually expensive scenery. Von Klauber's relations with Marcia had ended more unprettily than most. We knew that he had borrowed thousands of dollars from her while her lover and refused to recognize the debt after discovering or pretending to discover her in the arms of Morrie Stein. Mr. Stein, a purring, monkish man with over-red lips, upturned eyes, a grasshopper's body and a prodigious sneer flying, flag like, from his lips, had been Marcia's last substitute for love. We knew little of this adventure, but our suspicions of Morrie were quickened by an aversion which all his intimates seemingly held for him.

There was, slightly down on the list of suspects but still qualifying for our gossip, Percy Locksley, a Pickwickian fellow minus, however, all

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hint of simplicity or innocence — a journalist with a facetious but blood curdling cruelty to his style who had figured disturbingly in Marcia's life. He had been rumored as her possible husband, which rumor Marcia had scotched with great public cries of outrage and epigram at Locksley's expense. And though this might seem small motive for murder, to know Locksley was to suspect him of anything, from homicide to genius.

And there was also Emil Wallerstein, the poet, who had hounded Marcia's doorsill for a year, smitten, drunken, vicious, bawling for her favors and threatening to hang himself with her garter (like Gerard de Nerval) if she refused; who had made quite a show of going to the dogs (at his friends' expense) as a result of her coldness; and whom Marcia, for reasons hidden from us, had thoroughly and always cleverly despised.

Also further down the list was Clyde Veering, a charming, faded roué, once a font of learning and now a fat little Silenus in oxford glasses clinging to a perpetual cocktail. Veering was known amusingly as a connoisseur of decadence. His tasteful bachelor apartment was at the service of his friends of both sexes providing their intentions were sufficiently abnormal or dishonorable. It was a bit difficult to conceive of Veering as a murderer, but like a number of others we held suspect, it was more his possible secret knowledge of the crime than participation in it which excited us.

However, none of these, nor anyone else, came under the hand of the law. There was some surreptitious questioning, a great deal of libel-cautious hints in the news columns, but no arrests. Nothing happened despite the baying of the bloodhounds. A peculiarly gallant reticence seemed to surround Marcia, dead. No letters were found among her effects, no voice from the grave gave direction to the hunt. And the mysterious ending of this charming and famous woman slowly embedded itself behind other local excitements.

It was four weeks after the murder, when its mystery had subsided to an occasional paragraph, that Maurice Tillayou emerged from the shadows and in a spectacular manner.

We who had known Marcia well or too well, received an invitation from the old gentleman. It was strangely worded. It read: "May I have the honor of your company at a dinner Friday evening which I am giving in memory of my daughter, Marcia? I strongly urge you to attend, for matters vital to yourself as well as to the mystery surrounding my daughter's murder are to be revealed in my house. I am asking you in all fairness to be present — or represented."

A few of us were amused and touched by the old actor's melodramatic summons. But there were almost a score of others whom I found to be filled with disquiet. The matter was guardedly discussed over a num-

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ber of telephones. Efforts to reach old Tillayou in advance for further information availed nothing.

It rained on that Friday night. Thunder rolled in the sky and the streets were full of that picnic-like confusion which storm brings to the city. I rang the bell of the Tillayou roost and waited in the unfamiliar old hallway until the door was opened by an amazingly senile fellow, stooped, cackling and practically mummified. He was obviously the servant and obviously in a state of complete mental paralysis. For behind him in a large studio-like room, buzzing, clattering, laughing, was as brow-beating a coterie of celebrities as the theater had to offer. They had arrived, and this was odd for these chronic dinner wreckers, on time. I noticed that a number were already on their third cocktail and that the babble which greeted me was completely lacking in those overtones of ennui, disdain and bad manners which usually marked their get-togethers.

I looked vainly for a glimpse of Tillayou and learned from several sources that the old windjammer was still lurking in the wings, building up his entrance. It was a familiar enough group, a rather morbid round-up it seemed, of men and women who had loved Marcia Tillayou, cheated her, quarreled with her, lied to her, drunk with her, amused and betrayed her and been part of that strident, characterless treadmill which is the Broadway Parnassus. So reminiscent were they all of Marcia that she seemed almost present, almost certain to appear and join them, as they stood about maliciously guillotining absent comrades and exchanging those tireless reminiscences which Celebrities always have for each other.

I was rather thrilled at the spectacle, for old Tillayou's intention was plain. He had assembled a company of suspects and was obviously going to climax the evening by some formal accusation of guilt. There was a handful, like myself, who could look forward to no such distinction, but who knew what the old actor had got into his addled head. We had all been part of Marcia's world and we might all be presumed to have had some insight into the mystery that had climaxed her life.

This little world Tillayou had summoned out of its orbit into his humble old actor lodgings made a uniform picture. Its members were as alike as the decorations on a Christmas tree. There was about them an identical air, a similarity of inner and outer tailoring as if they had all been finished off on the same loom. Success was in their names and New York, the New York of the roman candle signs, of Ballyhoo and Ego, Merry-go-round Achievement and Overnight Fortune hung like a tag from their words and manners. They were the cream of a certain electric lighted firmament — its satraps and its nobles — and if you liked this world you liked them; if you revered this world, as old Tillayou once had, these were gods for your genuflections. A swift and glittering

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world it was, a bauble of a planet, out of which were hatched nightly the ephemera of art, the fireflies that masqueraded as beacons for an hour.

I joined Veering, always the source of rich information. He was pouting childishly over his fifth cocktail, cackling that he was much too bored by old Tillayou's banality to talk about it and regretting he had wasted an evening, when so few (virile) ones remained. I moved toward Locksley and fell to studying the half hundred costume photographs of Tillayou in his heyday that decorated the wall.

"He played all the parts," I said. "He could illustrate a full edition of the Bard."

"Yes," said Locksley, "he had that talent for bad acting which made him a natural and tireless Shakesperean."

Von Klauber, joining us, remarked, "Marcia always called him that Old Davil Ham."

"We saw him once as Richelieu," O'Shea said coming up to us. "I'll never forget Marcia's delight when he went up in his lines in the third act. She said it saved the play."

Wallerstein, the poet, not yet drunk, stood glowering at von Klauber.

"The destruction of your Pierrette painting of Marcia," he sneered, "was a great blow to the world of art."

"Thank you," said von Klauber, "I didn't know you had ever had the good fortune to see that painting."

Veering chuckled.

"Marcia always loathed it," he said, winking at everybody. He had, mysteriously, a distaste for artists.

"It was painted under handicaps," said von Klauber calmly.

"Miss Tillayou must have been a very difficult subject."

Lawyer Felix had joined us.

"Not difficult to paint," said von Klauber, "but difficult to please."

"And very ungrateful," Locksley chuckled. "She always secretly believed that the portrait had been painted with a cake of laundry soap. Or so she said."

Veering stared morosely toward the door of an adjoining room.

"That," he said, "is presumably the old gentleman's lair. Do you think if we applauded violently, he would come out for a bow, at least? I'm slowly perishing of hunger."

The rain rattled in the windows, the thunder rolled, our babble grew tense and nastier with a growing undercurrent of mutiny, a large contingent beginning to murmur of bolting the entire farcical business, and then Tillayou appeared. He was dressed in a combination of evening clothes and a black velvet jacket and looked surprisingly younger. None of us had ever seen or dreamed of so vibrant a Tillayou, or fancied so dominant a figure would crawl out of that old cocoon.

We stopped talking and listened to Tillayou as if the lights had gone out around us and he alone stood in brightness. He had brought a stranger into the room. He introduced this new guest, identifying each of us unctuously by calling and achieve-

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ment. The guest was Carl Scheuttler which was a name as striking to us at the moment as Sherlock Holmes. Mr. Scheuttler was from the District Attorney's office. He had led the futile hunt for Marcia's murderer and had promised, in the news columns from day to day, "important developments before nightfall." His presence in this room surrounded by this round-up promised definite entertainment. Marcia's murderer was among us, or at least so Tillayou thought, and was going to be served us for dessert.

We started for the dining room, all grown very formal. A long, improvised banquet table was set for us. Tillayou ordered us to find our place cards and under no circumstances change them. Mr. Scheuttler was eyeing us professionally, at least so it seemed, holding himself aloof from our sallies and making no compromising friendships which might embarrass him when the great moment of accusation and arrest arrived.

As we seated ourselves we noted a number of odd things, which then dropped at least out of my mind because of what happened immediately. Locksley was the first to speak after the chairs had stopped scraping and we were all in our places.

"Who," inquired Locksley feelingly and pointing at the one empty chair at the foot of the table, "who is that miserable miscreant?"

From the other end of the table where old Tillayou and his velvet jacket were presiding came a slow, sonorous answer.

"That is for my guest of honor, sir."

Locksley reached over and examined the place card.

"Well, well," he chuckled, "this seat has been reserved for one not entirely unknown to all of us."

"Who?" inquired Morrie Stein.

"Marcia Tillayou," said Locksley, "who has gone out for the moment to fetch her harp."

"Serve the dinner, Mr. Harvey," said our host to the old mummy, "we are all here."

Kraznoff, the dancer, who was seated rather near the empty chair, rose nervously.

"Please, I like change my plaze," she announced.

There was laughter.

"Come, come, sit down." Morrie Stein grinned, "Marcia was much too sensible to turn into a ghost."

Locksley was beaming at our host.

"This is marvelous," he said, "Mr. Tillayou, bless his old heart, will turn out the lights and little Marcia will dance for us with a tambourine."

"It's an insult to Marcia," said Emily Duane.

"You're mistaken," von Klauber smiled at her, "the insult is to us. But a very stupid one. So it doesn't matter."

Lawyer Felix, sensing troubled waters, grew oily.

"Perhaps Mr. Tillayou isn't serious," he said. "It may be just a sentimental gesture. You do not really believe she is here, Mr. Tillayou?"

To this Tillayou answered softly.

"There are more things in Heaven

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and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

"Very good," said Locksley.

O'Shea, who had been staring sadly at the empty chair, suddenly leaned across the table and addressed it.

"Hello darling," he said softly. "You look quite stunning tonight. Who gave you those beautiful lilies?"

The thunder rolled outside. Emily Duane gasped. But Locksley, not to be outdone in sallies by thunder or screams, cooed politely.

"Pass the olives, will you, Veering," he said, "before Marcia makes a pig of herself."

There being no olives and since there was no Marcia, this struck us as doubly droll. We laughed. Von Klauber turned his monocle on the "Representative from Scotland Yard."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Scheuttler?" he asked.

"I'm sure they're out of his jurisdiction," said Veering.

The elderly Mr. Harvey was tottering around the table filling wine glasses. Wallerstein, his dark, angry face intent on the empty chair, announced abruptly.

"Death is not a final word. We do not die so quickly. Marcia was never more alive than she is in this room tonight. Her innermost secrets are at this table. We are a compendium of Marcia."

"That's quite right," said O'Shea moodily. "We all loved her, in our varied fashions."

Tillayou, silent and queerly aglow, repeated under his breath the words, "loved her," and stared around the table, his eyes flooding with tears.

"Now that's rotten taste," Veering murmured, "calling us here to stage an exhibition of table rapping — and tears."

"A little grief over Marcia's death wouldn't be so amiss," said O'Shea, "particularly among her friends."

The aged Mr. Harvey, who, Locksley had been quick to decide, was the famous Sante Fe provisioner, was bringing in soup plates, sparsely filled and almost cold and clattering them down one at a time in front of the guests. Indignant requests for spoons rising from one end of the table confused him and brought him to a standstill, shivering in his tracks and regarding his master unhappily. Tillayou nodded reassuringly at him, dried his eyes, beamed, pushed his chair from the table and stood up. This unexpected gesture brought quiet. I noticed that Mr. Scheuttler had lowered his head and was frowning severely at the tablecloth.

"I am an old actor," Tillayou began in measured tones, "and with the audience seated and the curtain up, I find it hard to wait."

He favored us with an engaging, almost cringing smile.

"Art is long but time is fleeting," he continued, "and there is one who bids me speak." However, he didn't speak, but fell once more into quotation. It was a poem this time.

"Love, hear thou! How desolate
the heart is, ever calling

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Ever unanswered, and the dark
rain falling,
Then as now. . . ."

This mystic invocation done with, Tillayou struck a pose that showed the oration itself was about to begin. But how describe such an oration! How bad it was, and how illumined afterwards with a grandeur we never knew was in it. Yet to betray its climax would be somehow to deprive it of the quality belonging to it during its delivery, the bravado with which he spoke it into the sharpened teeth of perhaps the city's most finicky raconteurs, the clownish humors which it achieved unconsciously as it went on, the boredom, the suspense which seemed to promise only the cruel laughter of the audience.

There were, alas, sad lapses of logic in his speech, when the old actor's mind failed to provide the correct transition, ironies which would have seemed far fetched and inexplicable were they not so obviously borrowed from Mark Antony's funeral address; and there would have been more pauses in it even than there were, had Tillayou not helped himself to the language of the Bard. We heard *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* and *Romeo*, in whispers and inflections that sounded to our kind like rather hilarious caricatures. We listened with distaste, sneers, and apprehension for what might still follow, to Shylock's unctuous tones, and the cries of Spartacus before the Roman populace. Altogether, it was a performance that would have required more than a little indulgence on the part of the politest audience, and one which only O'Shea among us, his head leaning on his hand in one of his idle postures, seemed mysteriously to enjoy.

"You are my guests," it went, "very distinguished guests, and if I offend by what I am going to say, I ask your indulgence as the father of one who was admirable to you. I am the ghost of Banquo come to trouble your feasting.

"These, Mr. Scheuttler, are all very honorable and distinguished citizens who have gone out of their way to gratify the whim of an old actor by supping in his home. They are the great names of that world I have so long served with my humble talents.

"You asked, sirs, if I believed my daughter Marcia was present in this galaxy of her friends. It may be the wandering wits of an old man but I see her there, sitting tragic and beautiful, about her the sound of rain and of sweet bells jangling out of tune. Smiling at those who loved her. Yet she looks with cold eyes at one who sits here, with accusing eyes at one whose heart shouts, 'Avaunt and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!'

"Sweet and fair she was, the brightness of her cheek did shame the stars as daylight doth the lamp. But I won't bore you by asking you to recall those charms you once admired so, those virtues you once held so highly, almost as highly as myself.

"You have not come here tonight to hear a doting father spread his

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miseries before you, but for sterner business which from your courtesy and attentiveness I feel sure you have guessed.

"Mr. Scheuttler asked me to tell him this matter privately but I refused. For you were all her friends, her honorable friends, and I wanted you present.

"Who killed my daughter? Who took her life? There's the question. I have the answer. But I'll not merely give a name and cry 'murderer!' No, I have the proofs.

"You all loved her and admired her, helped her through the years of struggle, made life sweet for her with your tenderness and understanding and unselfishness. Yet one of you murdered her. Murdered her!

"He is here. He came to my humble house, fancying himself too clever for detection. He sits now at my table. Mr. Harvey, close the doors! Lock them! So he can't escape. Lock us in! The windows too. Ha — good man, Harvey. He has served me well. He was with me through those years when I too, like my daughter, was a star; not as bright or shining as she. But Maurice Tillayou was a name, sirs, that belonged to the grand days of the theater. Thank you, Harvey. You may go to bed now and sleep sweetly, and may angels guard thy dreams.

"Where was I, Mr. Scheuttler? Oh, yes, the doors are locked. Is this not like a play? Your faces waiting for the name — the name of Judas. All of you waiting, each edging from his neighbor. I keep my promise, Mr. Scheuttler. I have the proofs, all of them, enough to send that one from this table to the gallows. The man who killed Marcia, who murdered my Marcia, is looking at me. Ah, the terror in his eyes. His name is —"

Thunder had been rolling through the last of his words. Now it crashed outside drowning out his voice. And at the same time the room in which we sat turned black. The entire scene disappeared as in a dream. The lights had gone out. The women screamed. Chairs toppled over. There was a moment of mysterious confusion, consternation, with cries and even laughter in the dark. But we were riveted by a voice calling wildly in the black room. It was Tillayou.

"Let me go! He's killing me! Help! Help! Oh my God! He's killing — killing —"

The voice shut off as if hands were choking its sound. There was a flash of lightning and in the phosphorescent glare that lay in the room for a moment we seemed to see something mad — Tillayou sinking to the floor in a corner, his hands over his heart, and blood flowing over them. The tableau vanished.

An awkward nightmarish and foolishly restrained commotion followed. We seemed to think it was something unreal we were witnessing and we were not a crowd to scream, to throw down chairs or believe in murder at a lightning glance. Reality is a far cry from those forever writing about

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it. Emily Duane inquired in a polite voice for lights.

O'Shea was the first to hold a cigarette lighter over the old man in the corner. On his knees, gasping, one hand on the floor and trying to crawl somewhere, we made out Tillayou. In the same moment Mr. Scheuttler, who obviously knew his way about in such dilemmas, was on O'Shea with a flashlight and apparently convinced he was the murderer. Now at last there were screams from the women and a rather hysterical calling for lights from the men and over it all the groans and gasps of a dying man whom Mr. Scheuttler was hounding professionally for a dying statement.

In fact we, Mr. Scheuttler and Tillayou seemed to be acting in a play — one of those Broadway melodramas full of darkness, murder, suspects and all the unconvincing trappings of theatricalized mystery. Some of us lit matches, others cigarette lighters, others searched for lights or joined in hounding the dying man alongside the frantic and barking Mr. Scheuttler. O'Shea provided a minute's extra excitement by kicking in the door and reappearing in the face of Mr. Scheuttler's drawn gun, this official having forbidden anyone to leave the premises, with a candelabra. This he lit and the candelabra illumined with its mellow beam a scene that seemed as operatic as *Tosca*.

"It's dark," Old Tillayou was moaning, "Marcia, where are you? My little bright haired girl. Marcia, my child."

Now we all leaned over him, urging him, like a mob of earnest supers, to tell who had killed him, and eyeing each other the while askance. Mr. Scheuttler, in particular, convinced that the old man was about to name his murderer, waited with his gun still drawn.

But the old actor was raving.

"Blood," he said, lifting his hands and staring at them, "my blood." And again asked to speak out, he started crying for Marcia. "Listen," he said, "listen to her. Ever calling . . . ever unanswered." There was more of it, heart-breaking and somehow unreal.

Then there was the awful moment when the old man seemed to search for someone. Now his eyes were calm. He recognized Mr. Scheuttler.

"Let me whisper the name," he murmured eagerly, and so faintly we could hardly hear, "he — he mustn't escape. Closer, my friends. Lend me your ears . . ."

"Who was it?" someone couldn't help saying desperately.

Mr. Scheuttler roared for quiet, only to repeat the question himself in the next moment.

"Ah," said Tillayou, "it was . . . it was . . ." and lapsed into a silence. There was a babble of questioning as the silence grew prolonged, and then hysterical. Mr. Scheuttler no longer seemed to be watching his suspects. He was looking at the old man who appeared to be quietly crying. Some tears rolled down his cheeks. And

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then an incredible thing happened. Tillayou died.

There had been some coughing, the rattle that is so unmistakable even to those who have never heard it. But no one somehow had expected death.

An even more melodramatic pandemonium followed Tillayou's passing. Police were called for. We were ordered about. Mr. Scheuttler flourished his gun. Mr. Harvey was sent for from his sleep guarded by angels and, as he stood moaning over his master's body, questioned about the switch for the lights which hadn't worked all this time. O'Shea took a lead in this questioning, despite Mr. Scheuttler's violent orders addressed to one whom he now regarded firmly as a murderer. Mr. Harvey was incapable of any answers but O'Shea suddenly went down on his hands and knees and began crawling under the table while Mr. Scheuttler, fancying this an effort to escape, threatened loudly he would never get out of the room alive. But suddenly, in the midst of these threats, as O'Shea fumbled under the carpet at the table's edge, the lights went on.

"If you will allow me to be a bit oracular and put that gun away," O'Shea said, poking his head up from under the table, "the mystery is a very simple one. Tillayou turned out the lights himself. The switch was right under his foot. And then he killed himself."

It was dawn when Locksley, O'Shea and I entered O'Shea's rooms. We had spent an active and rather noisy evening as guests of Mr. Scheuttler and two police officials. Mr. Harvey had finally told his story. Tillayou had had the switch under the table installed the day before and this vital clue had been quickly verified from the electricians who had done the work. Mr. Harvey related that Tillayou had ordered him not to cook any food for our banquet, saying it wouldn't be necessary, and had also said that dishes and silverware would not be needed at his dinner. The absence of these items had been one of the odd things we noticed when we had first entered the dining room. Mr. Harvey also identified the dagger removed from Tillayou's body as one that had seen service in an ancient production of *Macbeth* and one which his master had spent the hours before the arrival of his guests sharpening in his bedroom.

There was no doubt that Tillayou had killed himself. But Mr. Scheuttler and the two police officials remained confused by the manner of his suicide. O'Shea persuaded them, aided by Mr. Harvey's tears and tattle, that the old actor's mind had been unhinged by grief over Marcia's death and that the whole matter could be explained only by the poor man's insanity. We were all allowed finally to go, after assuring the officials we would appear any time they desired us for further questioning.

In O'Shea's rooms, Locksley and I waited patiently while that moody Celt opened bottles and prepared us

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drinks. After he had accomplished these rites he went to his desk.

"I'll let you read this letter," he said. "It's from Marcia. It was mailed the night she was found dead."

He handed us a scrawled piece of note paper. We read:

"Alfred, I'm bored, tired, hurt, sick, full of nasty things. You were always the nicest. So take care of my father, like a good boy, will you? I'd stay a while longer but death seems easier and simpler than life. What are a few pills more or less to one who has swallowed so much? Goodbye and do you remember the first night of *The Forgotten Lady*? For the last time,

"Marcia."

O'Shea smiled at us moodily as we finished.

"That's the truth," he said, "she committed suicide."

"What about the bullets?" I asked.

"Guess," said O'Shea.

"Tillayou," said Locksley.

"Right," said O'Shea. "He found her dead with the poison still in her hand, very likely. And he couldn't bear that.

"He worshipped her," said O'Shea. "She was his star. But stars don't commit suicide. Only failures do that. Only very miserable and defeated people do that. He tried to keep her a star. So he set about slashing the painting and wrecking the place. It was all done very bravely so that the world might never guess that Marcia had died so ingloriously.

"At least," said O'Shea, "that's what I thought it was at first. And I decided to say nothing. What we saw tonight has got me all excited," he smiled and drank again.

"It was terrible," said Locksley.

"It was marvelous," O'Shea grinned at him. His gaunt, muscular mouth trembled with the mood of eloquence. "I read the signs wrong," he said. "Do you know what happened?"

"No," said Locksley, "except that the old boy was madder than a Hatter, poor soul."

"He wasn't mad," said O'Shea, "he was sane. You see, my lads, the old polliwog never thought of Marcia as having killed herself. He found her dead by her own hand. But that didn't mean anything. He saw her as murdered — by all of us. Murdered, gadzooks, by all the lying, cheating, faking rabble of friends that had danced around her including your humble servant, Alfred O'Shea. We'd killed her," he said dourly. "Do you remember what he called us — all honorable and distinguished friends, all full of sweetness and unselfishness toward her? That was cute of the old windbag. Looking at us whom he hated so and rolling those juicy sentences at us. We were a flock of vampires that had fed off her. That's how he saw us, all of us. When he found her dead he thought of her as murdered, by us, by Broadway. It was all our hands that had lifted the poison glass to her mouth. And he went cracked with the curious idea of somehow bringing all these phantom murderers to justice."

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We nodded. O'Shea drank again.

"That was a great performance tonight at the table," he said. "And a cold house. But he went over big."

"What made you think of another switch?" I asked.

"I knew that something strange was on the boards," O'Shea grinned. "I wanted to interrupt. But I hated to break up his show, whatever it was going to be. I'm kind of glad I didn't, aren't you?"

We said we were, but looked blankly at our host for further explanation. O'Shea drank again, grinned, his eyes filling with admiration.

"Do you realize," he said softly, "that the old barnstormer was playing his death scene from the moment he came into the room, with Sherlock Holmes in tow? He had the dagger in his pocket. He'd figured it out, rehearsed it in his bedroom for days, sharpening away at Macbeth's old toad stabber. He had his lines down pat. He'd planned to kill himself with the name of the supposedly guilty party almost on his lips. He was going to go as far as saying who it was that had murdered Marcia and then, out with the lights and the dagger in his heart. Suspicion would be turned on all of us. We'd all of us be clapped into jail and raked over the coals, not for his murder alone, but for Marcia's. That was the main thing. Whoever had killed Marcia had snapped out the lights and done him in, just as he was about to reveal the name. That was the plot. What a grand old boy! I'll never forget his dying."

"Nor I," I agreed.

"Dying and remembering his lines to the last," said O'Shea. "What a memory. That was my favorite poem he kept quoting — *Rain on Rahoun* by Joyce. He heard me recite it once — on my honeymoon. You remember when he lay in the corner with the knife in him — acting, by God. All that wailing and mumbling about Marcia — do you know what he was doing? Ad libbing, like the good old trouper he was, filling in because death had missed its cue. Lend me your ears — it was the grand manner — grease paint and blood. And do you remember how he gurgled finally in that old ham voice of his — 'It was . . . it was . . .' and died exactly at the right moment? What timing!"

"I remember how he said goodbye to Mr. Harvey," said Locksley, "that was — pretty."

We sat silent, overcome by the memory of old Tillayou's oration, hearing it anew with the mystery out of it.

"None of us will die as gallantly," said O'Shea, "and so much in the full sanctity of love — and art."

Locksley rose and shivered. A wry smile came into his Pickwickian face.

"A lovely piece of old fashioned miming," he said, "but as fruitless a drama as I ever had the misfortune to witness."

"You're right," O'Shea said, "the plot was full of holes. I could have helped him a lot with the construction. But—it was a great Last Night."

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Winner of EQMM'S First Cover Contest

DEATH IN THE WINDOW

by WARREN AMERMAN

"Come in, M. Lafroux," said Inspector Rouin of the Paris Police. "Please be seated."

"Thank you, Inspector," answered the tall man, dropping heavily into a chair by the desk. "It was horrible, Monsieur, that which I witnessed. In front of my own shop, murder. Incredible!"

Inspector Rouin spoke quietly. "You knew the unfortunate girl?"

Lafroux replied, "A little. Her name is — was — Mlle. Jeanne Andreé. From time to time she has purchased perfumes of me. She preferred *La Belle Nuit.*"

"Be good enough to describe just what you saw," said the Inspector.

"It is something that I shall never forget," said the perfume maker. "Every detail stands out in my eye. It was nine o'clock in the evening, and I was preparing to close the shop. Glancing up from my ledger, I saw Mlle. Andreé staring through the window at the display of perfumes. I nodded to her, but she seemed wrapped in her own thoughts. Then, from the darkness behind her, two large hands emerged, encircling her throat. My blood turned to ice. I could not move. Her head snapped back, but there was no sound. I saw her sink to the ground, and tore myself from the chair to which I had been rooted. I dashed from the store, but her assailant had vanished into the night. A glance told me that poor Jeanne was dead, and I ran back into the shop to phone your office. The terrible shock of what I had seen caused me to tremble like a leaf as I sat at my desk until your arrival."

"Just where was Mlle. Andreé standing when she was attacked?"

Lafroux closed his eyes, his brow creased. "She stood beneath the painted sign on the window, between the words 'Lafroux' and 'Perfumes.' A little to the right of her on the shelf in the window was a container of perfume which I could see held her

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attention. Further to the right was a small blue compact. To the left were assorted colognes and perfumes, filling out the shelf."

Inspector Rouin took a photograph from a folder on his desk and studied it closely. "Monsieur Lafroux, would that every witness observed as accurately as you do," he said. "This photograph of the girl's body in front of your window checks the accuracy of everything you have told me. See. The body beneath the sign on the window, and to the right the perfume container, and farther to the right the small blue compact — all just as you said."

"One could scarcely forget what one had seen under such circumstances," said Lafroux soberly.

"Yes," the Inspector said, "a most accurate description. And one that will hang you, M. Lafroux."

"What do you mean?" cried the perfume dealer, suddenly white.

"I mean, monsieur, that your description of the window is as it appears from *outside* the shop — as it is in this picture, as you saw it over the girl's shoulders when you strangled her. Had you been describing the view as seen from *within* the shop, the perfume container would have appeared to the left of the girl, and the compact even farther to the left, not to the right as you said. An attractive girl, Lafroux. Blackmail, I suppose?"

Editor's Note: Mr. Amerman's story was awarded the prize despite a glaring flaw. The lettering on the window, you will recall, read Lafroux PERFUMES. *The shop, therefore, should have been located in an English-speaking city. Mr. Amerman made the mistake of placing the shop in Paris. If this were true, the lettering would have read* Lafroux PARFUMS. *Despite this fault, Mr. Amerman's story was judged the best of the 771 entries submitted by readers of EQMM. Also, we are making an offer to purchase one of the other submissions, and if our offer is accepted, the second-best story will appear in the June 1948 issue of EQMM.*

HONORABLE MENTION

A Puzzle in Essence by Daniel Schoen, Yonkers, New York
The Ritz-Plaza Lobby Murder by J. H. Mills, North Truro, Mass.
The Red Letters by Gertrude J. Cass, Buffalo, New York
The Last Note by Townsend Hand, New York, New York
Windy City Blues by Ettore Storto, Beloit, Wisconsin

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Raoul Whitfield and Dashiell Hammett began to write letters to each other in the early 1920s, when both were appearing in "Black Mask." At that time Whitfield was writing prolifically and being published like mad, but Hammett's stories were appearing only now and then. Whitfield, who was surely one of Hammett's first boosters, used to write many letters to editors asking: "Where is this man, Hammett? Why don't you accept more of his stories?"

And shortly after, Whitfield and Hammett actually met — in San Francisco. All of which, Mrs. Whitfield now tells us, is a long story. But we have managed to glean a few facts and we pass them on to you, through the courtesy of Mrs. Whitfield.

Whitfield and Hammett talked shop — naturally. It was terrifying, recalls Mrs. Whitfield, to hear them seriously debate whether a particular story should have seven murders — or twenty-seven! Mrs. Whitfield remembers the sight of Hammett writing laboriously, alone in a room, with dirty dishes strewn all over the kitchen floor — working conditions quite different from those preferred by Whitfield (which, Mrs. Whitfield adds cryptically, probably accounts for a number of things).

It would have been an interesting experience to hear Whitfield and Hammett talking shop — interesting and instructive; just as it would be if Hammett and Chandler discussed their technique and methods today. From personal knowledge, we know that Hammett has mellowed in the last ten years. We have a strong hunch that his present ideas would not always harmonize with his past work. Whether Chandler has mellowed, we don't frankly know — except that we firmly believe that all the "rough, tough" boys calm down as they grow older . . .

DEAD MEN TELL TALES

by RAOUL WHITFIELD

CAMERON slumped low in his chair, looked over the tops of six or seven telephones and saw Grindell threading his way between battered typewriter desks, towards the facing dais of the city editor. There was a smile on the big man's face — a pleasant smile. It was as though he were coming along to congratulate Cameron. But the city editor knew Grindell was coming along to do no such thing. The big man could smile hatred; he was smiling hatred now.

The fire alarm, hooked into the city room, clanged monotonously and Vance, the only copy reader on the job, said in a flat voice:

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"Second alarm, Jay."

Cameron nodded slightly, another thought in his mind.

"Yeah — second alarm," he said slowly and softly. "It's a piano factory and I hate the things — let it burn."

Grindell came around one side of the raised platform and got close to the city editor. Their heads were about level. Grindell had bushy black hair and black eyes. His lips were straight, solid and thin and his face looked oily. He wore a brown suit and a brown soft hat was pulled low over his low forehead. He kept the smile on his face and spoke casually.

"Hello, Cameron. How's things?"

Jay Cameron lit a cigarette without offering the pack to Grindell.

"Good," he said. "A woman got murdered yesterday and a piano factory is burning down just now. Like to go out and watch it?"

"Love to, but I haven't time," Grindell said. "Just dropped in to ask a few questions."

Cameron nodded. "Sure," he replied. "A lot of our customers do that. News first — service next."

Grindell looked thoughtful. "What kind of service?" he asked. "Stool pigeon?"

Cameron looked over Grindell's head at the huge picture of Horace Greeley that was accumulating Pittsburgh dirt on the wall.

"It depends," he said quietly.

The smile went from Grindell's eyes and lips.

"Like hell it does," he said in a sharp tone. "You pull Britton away from the *Green Fan*, Mr. Cameron. And you pull him away quick! When Ecker was running this sheet he didn't use his reporters as stool pigeons."

"For the last six months of his life Ecker wasn't running this sheet," Jay said very steadily. "Maybe you know who *was* running it."

Grindell smiled again. It was a hard, shifty smile.

"I don't know and I don't care," he stated. "But you're running the sheet now. And you're pretty young to retire in a hurry."

"I'm not thinking about retiring," Cameron said gently.

The big man shrugged. "Some people retire without thinking about it," he suggested. "If you get my idea."

A phone made tinkling sound and the city editor lifted a receiver. He said: "Cameron" and waited. After a few seconds he said cheerfully: "All right, Britton, forget about her. Drop out to the *Green Fan* around ten and see what happens. But be nice."

He hung up. Grindell was breathing slowly and heavily, still close to him. The big man spoke very softly:

"Don't be a fool, Cameron."

The city editor looked towards the far end of the long room.

"Take a walk, Mr. Grindell," he said very coldly. "Right down to the end of the room, and then down two flights of stairs. Outside and north. Across the river and out to the *Green Fan*. See that the floor is well polished and that the waiters are on the job. Saturday night's a big night."

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Grindell's eyes were very small beneath heavy lids. Both hands were jammed in the pockets of his suit coat and his body was stiff. Then, suddenly, he relaxed.

"Okey, Chief," he said with sarcasm. "No hard feelings?"

Cameron raised his eyebrows. "Hard feelings?" he said. "Why?"

Grindell shrugged. "I just thought maybe you'd be sore," he said easily. "You can see my side of it."

Cameron narrowed his brown eyes and ran the palm of his right hand down his smooth-shaven right cheek. His cheek bones were rather high and his face thin and strong. He had a fine mouth; his body was tall and lean. He was thirty-five.

"Yes," he replied. "I can. You run a rotten spot. It's tony enough to pull in decent people. It isn't a cheap joint. You've had a murder out there and I've had ideas about it. That's why I've had a reporter out there. He isn't a stool pigeon — he's out there because news may be out there."

Grindell was smiling in his hard way. "I wouldn't want any *Press* reporter to get hurt," he said very reflectively.

Cameron spoke sharply. "It would be bad — damn' bad."

"Yeah," Grindell replied. "But it might be bad only for him."

He smiled more cheerfully and nodded his head as though agreeing with himself. Then he said: "Well, so long —"

Cameron didn't speak. Grindell moved away from the city editor's desk and walked slowly towards the far end of the room. A short distance from Cameron he stopped and lifted a book from one of the reporter's desks. He looked at it, then lifted it higher so that the city editor could see the title. The title was "Dead Men Tell No Tales." Grindell smiled and dropped the book almost carelessly on the desk. Then he moved on. Cameron slumped low in his chair and watched him go, his face expressionless.

Another alarm clanged in and Vance lifted his head for the count and said:

"Third, Jay."

Cameron nodded and called sharply: "Redding — better catch it. Hawks and Daly are out there. You handle the feature stuff."

Redding got up and reached for his hat. Cameron picked up a phone and called a short number with a short name ahead of it. While he was waiting he listened in on a call from Daly, who told him a section of the piano factory roof had let go — three firemen going with it. Cameron looked at the city room clock and saw that it was nine-fifteen. The dead-line for the first morning edition to reach the streets was ten-twenty.

"Hang on and phone the stuff in," he said. "If I'm not here — give it to Vance. Watch the dead-line."

A voice sounded over the wire of the other phone and Cameron asked for Britton. He got the desk sergeant and was told that Britton had left a couple of minutes ago, not telling

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anyone in the particular precinct station he reached about the same time every night where he was going. Cameron thanked the sergeant, swore and hung up.

"You going outside, Jay?" Vance asked.

Cameron looked somewhere beyond the copy reader. "You heard what Grindell said, Vance?"

The copy reader said: "Only part."

"He told me to pull Britton away from his night-club — the *Green Fan.* I said no and called Britton while he was listening. I told him to go over there around ten and stick around a bit. Grindell got cold, said no hard feelings and walked when I told him to walk. On the way out he picked up a book from Sandy's desk and held it so I could see the title. 'Dead Men Tell No Tales.' Then he went on out."

Vance whistled softly. "He's a killer, Jay," he said quietly. "Britton's a good man, too."

Cameron closed his eyes and nodded. When he opened them Vance was looking at him narrowly. Cameron said:

"Don't forget what I just told you, Vance. I just called Britton at the South Side station. But he'd got away. I'm going out to the *Green Fan* and head him off. Grindell thinks he's been doing stoolie work, and I may have handled him wrong. I'll put a new man out there."

He stood up and reached behind him for his soft gray hat. Then he leaned over, opened a drawer and took an automatic from it. Keeping it low he inspected the clip, shoving it back in again. Vance said:

"For God's sake — be careful, Jay. Grindell would rather get you than Britton."

Cameron smiled a little. "Sure he would," he agreed. "But he's got to be more careful — getting me."

The city editor pulled the gray hat low over his forehead. He stepped down from the raised platform that held the crescent-shaped desk.

"Watch the dead-line on the fire, Vance," he said. "If Rallings wants to know why I'm not around tell him I said I had a tip on something big enough to take me outside."

Vance was frowning. "I'll take care of the sheet, Jay," he said grimly. "But for God's sake —"

Cameron lifted his right hand slightly, in a gesture of protest.

"Don't," he said sharply. "I hate repeaters."

Vance swore. "Grindell likes 'em," he said tonelessly. "With ten shots in 'em."

The city editor's eyes were narrowed as he walked away from the desk, towards the far end of the room. There was rubber on his shoe heels and they made little sound on the concrete. He went down the stairs and reached the street. The factory that was burning was more than a half mile distant, but smoke from it was in the air. A police machine sped past filled with uniformed men.

Haddon, the Headquarters Police reporter, came up to him.

"I spotted Grindell going some-

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where in a hurry," he said. "He seemed to be thinking hard. I tagged along, without letting him see me. But it was only a phone call."

Cameron's eyes looked hurt. "Where's he making it?" he asked.

"The U.S. drugstore on the corner," he replied. "Anything up?"

Cameron spoke tonelessly. "Smells like the town's burning down."

The veteran nodded. "They're using up the reserves fast," he said. "From Central and the precinct stations."

The city editor nodded. "Better stick around — Vance is handling things for a while," he said.

He saw the curiosity in Haddon's eyes as he turned away. Rallings, the managing editor, would be curious, too. He seldom left the editorial room within an hour or so of the dead-line. And the fire had the makings of a four-alarmer.

Cameron went to the U.S. drugstore, went inside. Near the doors was a book counter and he read the title he'd read minutes before. His eyes went away from the book. Grindell was moving away from the counter, breaking open a pack of cigarettes. He looked up from the pack when he was near Cameron. There was an expression of flickering surprise in his eyes, which smiled. He offered the pack.

Cameron shook his head. Grindell spoke softly.

"Forget to tell me something — or did you just happen in?"

He watched the city editor closely, smiling. Cameron smiled a little, too.

"Just happened in," he said. "But I did forget to tell you something, Grindell. Britton didn't tell the police that he figured you knew something about the Carters' murder, at the *Green Fan*."

"No?" Grindell said. "Who did?"

Cameron continued to smile. "I did," he said quietly. "Britton gave me a tip and I thought things over. I told him what to tell you, and when he came back and said you didn't seem to understand — I took a walk around to Central and had a talk."

Grindell's black eyes were small. "That so?" he said a little huskily. "Well — the dicks asked questions and I answered them. But I didn't like it, Cameron."

The city editor nodded. "Carters was an interesting character — the murder happened at your club. News is news."

Grindell shrugged. "I didn't murder Carters, and I don't know who did. It didn't happen in my club — it happened outside. You can't pin it on me to make news."

"You hated Carters," Cameron said. "But the thing I'm trying to get across is that Britton was just a reporter —"

He checked himself as he saw Grindell's body jerk, and his black eyes widen in a swift expression of surprise. There was a short silence, then Cameron said slowly and grimly:

"Who did you just tell to get him, Grindell?"

"You kidding me, Cameron?"

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Grindell breathed softly.

The city editor shook his head. "It's a bad time for kidding, Grindell. It's a bad time for me to be away from the sheet. You just made a phone call from here."

Grindell's eyes were not smiling. "Any law against me using the phone?" he asked.

Cameron said softly: "No, but God help you if you don't change your mind on that phone order."

Grindell let smoke come from between his lips in a thin stream.

"Don't be a fool, Cameron," he muttered.

The city editor shook his head. "You said that upstairs. I won't. I'll be damn' sensible and damn' soft. Softer than I've ever been. Call the deal off and I'll pull Britton away from your spot. I'll keep him away."

Grindell was smiling again. "Decent of you," he said. "But I don't give a damn about that — he can stick around. It just made me sore, that's all."

He started to move towards the doors but Cameron caught him by an arm.

"You do give a damn, Grindell. You think Britton knows more than he does. He was the first man to get to Carters, after the shooting. You figured that if I wouldn't call him off — you were right. When I called him and told him to go out to your place tonight — you got very nice. And then you came down here and used a phone. In a hurry. And you told someone to finish Britton."

Grindell swore very softly. Cameron said: "When I said: 'Britton *was* just a reporter —' that gave you a jolt. You showed it. I'd put it in the past tense, without thinking. But *you* were thinking. Thinking of Britton as already out of things."

Grindell spoke coldly. "You've been drinking too much lately, Cameron. You're imagining things. I don't give a damn about your reporters. I was just a little sore, that's all. If he comes in tonight I'll stand him a beer."

Cameron said harshly: "You're generous. You know he won't come in."

Grindell looked at the city editor with small eyes. "Accidents happen," he said very slowly. "Britton's been messing around in a lot of stuff for your dirty sheet. If anything happens to him — you can't tie me in."

Cameron took his fingers away from the arm cloth of the other man's coat. He stood with his lean body relaxed.

"Britton isn't a cub reporter, and he isn't an angel," he said quietly. "He's been in jams before this one. But maybe they haven't been so tough. If you do what I think you're doing —"

He stopped. Grindell's eyes met his coldly. A man came into the store and nodded to the night-club owner. Grindell nodded back and spoke loudly.

"Britton's a good reporter. I like him, even if he isn't giving me a very good break just now."

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He beckoned to the man who had come in, introduced him to the city editor.

"Cameron — meet Jess Wilkes. Wilkes is the new manager of the Liberty Theatre."

They shook hands. Grindell smiled and said to Wilkes:

"Getting publicity on the Carters' murder, outside my club. Cameron thinks I've got it in for a reporter of his named Britton. I was just telling him I like the fellow." He patted Wilkes on the arm, smiled at Cameron. "Got to run along," he said.

He turned and went from the store. Wilkes nodded to Cameron, said the usual thing and moved towards the counter. The city editor stood motionless and watched Grindell go outside. There was a bitter smile on his face. The night-club owner had made two mistakes, but they weren't important. And he'd thought quickly, fixed up an alibi for himself. Wilkes would remember what he'd said about Britton.

Cameron drew a deep breath, looked at his wrist-watch. He went from the store, didn't see Grindell. He hailed a cab and said to the driver:

"The *Green Fan* — North Side."

On the way to the *Green Fan* Cameron had the driver stop the cab twice. It was nine-thirty and he doubted that Britton would reach the night-club before ten. He wanted to head him off if possible, and he wanted to ask some questions. But Britton wasn't at the Fifth Precinct Station nor at the North Side Hospital. Tony Sanders was at the hospital; he blinked at the city editor as he entered the corridor that led to the emergency dressing room.

Cameron said: "Come along with me, Tony."

He went outside and they climbed into the cab. Sanders was short and broad-shouldered; he had blue eyes and reddish hair. He was a good leg man, without imagination and with a nice memory.

The cab moved northward and Cameron slumped down in the seat again. Sanders said:

"That's a sweet blaze across the river — I figured they might drag some of the overflow patients to this side."

Cameron nodded. "Maybe," he agreed. He was silent for several seconds, then he said: "This is confidential, Tony. When someone murdered Harry Carters outside of the *Green Fan* three nights ago — Britton happened to be coming in. He was the first one to reach Carters. The playboy was on the grass in that fake grape arbor Grindell fixed up outside the club. Carters was dying, but he got out a few words. Grindell is a killer with political pull. He's killed two men. Both kills in self-defense. Britton came to me and told me the words Carters had got out before he died. I didn't play it up, but I've had Britton sticking around the club. Grindell had an alibi — and so did everyone else in the place. Grindell's claim was that someone had it in for

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Carters, knew he was out there — went out and got him. Tonight Grindell came to the sheet and told me I was using Britton as a stool-pigeon, and to pull him off. I said no and he got very nice. Then he went down and put in a phone call, after he'd heard me tell Britton over the phone — to go out to the club around ten."

Tony Sanders said nothing. Cameron spoke in a hard voice.

"I've had damn' few hunches in my life — but I've got one tonight. Grindell wants to get Britton. He doesn't know how much Britton knows or how much he's told me. He wants to play safe. With Britton out of the way anything he's told won't count so much. I want to head Britton off — I'm not a reporter killer."

Tony Sanders was frowning. "He wouldn't risk doing the job on Britton, or having it done, knowing that you'd be suspicious," he suggested.

Cameron smiled grimly. "I think he would," he disagreed. "He went out of his way to let a friend of his hear him tell me he liked Britton. He doesn't like him — and he hates my insides."

Sanders swore tonelessly. Cameron said: "When we get out here I'll go right in and look around. It's a bit early. You stick outside and if Britton comes along tell him to stay outside and to watch himself."

"Right," the reporter replied.

Ahead there was the green glow of lights on green. Beyond trees and the fake grape arbor was the shape of a two-story frame house that had been converted into a night-club. A large, spread green fan advertised the place — green spotlights giving it a vivid color.

Cameron leaned forward and said: "Pull in here — don't go in front of the place."

The driver pulled in and Cameron and Sanders got out. The city editor paid up, spoke softly to Sanders as the cab moved on.

"If he comes along — get him away from here. Don't let him come in. I won't be long."

Sanders nodded, and Cameron walked to the entrance, went through the fake arbor and entered the night-club. The fan effect was carried out inside, and the lighting was a dull green. A few couples were at tables, in dinner dress, and the dance orchestra was playing softly. A tall, slender man came forward and bowed to Cameron. He was just a little too sleek to be handsome.

Cameron said: "Grindell around?"

The sleek one smiled cheerfully. "No," he said. "I just talked to him on the phone. He'll be here in about half an hour."

Cameron smiled. "Know where he was when he called you?" he asked.

The sleek one nodded. "At the Detective Bureau," he said pleasantly. "You can call him there, Mr. Cameron."

Cameron kept the smile on his lips. "I've never seen you before," he said.

The sleek one bowed, still smiling.

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"Grindell said I should expect you, and he described you. He said you were to consider yourself the *Green Fan's* guest. I'm Jim Cline, the director."

Cameron nodded. "Nice of Grindell," he said with irony. "Do you know Ed Britton?"

The sleek one nodded, smiling.

"The reporter?" he said. "Yes — a fine fellow. We all like him, out here."

Cameron looked towards the dance floor. "He hasn't been in tonight?" he asked.

The director shook his head. "No," he replied. "But Grindell said to expect him and to treat him right."

A uniformed hat girl came to the director's side and spoke in an affected tone.

"Someone at the *Press* wants to talk with a Mr. Cameron, if he's here or as soon as he comes in, if he comes in."

Cameron looked at the girl without seeing her. "Where's the phone?" he asked.

She made a gesture that was as affected as her voice, and turned away. He followed her to a green booth, went inside, shut the door. As he reached for the receiver he breathed hoarsely: "If they're telling me —"

He broke off, lifted the receiver. He said: "This is Cameron."

Vance's voice said: "Benson, the dick from the River Precinct, just called. Two river men just found Britton's body. About two blocks from the piano factory that's burning, near a sand barge. He'd been struck on the head and shot twice. Dead."

Cameron said very softly: "Oh,—!"

There was a long silence and then Vance spoke.

"You still there, Jay?"

Cameron said: "Yes — still here." He waited several seconds. "All right, Vance. Use it for what it's worth. Reporter murdered. Police haven't any clues. Don't know the motive. Keep it out of the first edition, and hold it down to a couple of sticks."

Vance said: "Barkley Brothers. White Street and the river. No one heard shots — almost everybody is at the fire, in that section. Lots of smoke around, Benson said. Large caliber bullets — is his guess. Body at the barge until the coroner gets over there. Benson says he'll —"

Cameron cut in. "All right, Vance — and don't talk to anyone about Grindell coming in tonight."

Vance said shakily: "Sure, Jay."

Cameron spoke tonelessly. "Fire stuff coming in all right?"

Vance said: "Yeah — and Rallings is in. Wanted to know where you were. I said something big was on."

Cameron said grimly: "It's still on. You get the sheet out, Vance. I'll be moving around tonight."

Vance spoke flatly. "Right, Jay."

Cameron hung up the receiver, lighted a cigarette. His fingers were trembling just a little. He stayed in the booth until he'd had a few long pulls on the cigarette, then he opened the door and went outside. The music was playing a livelier tune and more couples were coming in. Cline stood

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looking at the dance floor, rubbing his palms together and smiling. He turned towards Cameron as the city editor headed for the door.

"Not waiting for Grindell?" he said cheerfully.

Cameron shook his head. There was a hard smile in his brown eyes.

"Got to get back to the sheet," he replied and started on.

Cline spoke again. "And if Britton comes in I'll say you've been here?"

Cameron's eyes were expressionless.

"Yeah," he said. "Do that."

Cline bowed and Cameron went outside, pulling his hat low over his forehead. Tony Sanders was crossing the street, coming towards the entrance arch, beyond the arbor. When Cameron, walking slowly, reached his side the reporter said:

"Thought I saw Britton across the street. But it wasn't."

They walked southward. Cameron spoke slowly.

"We won't have to stick around. Vance phoned here and happened to catch me. Britton's dead."

Sanders sucked in his breath, stopped moving. Cameron walked on. A cab came along and he hailed it. When he got inside Sanders climbed in behind him. The driver twisted his head and Cameron said:

"River and White Street. Keep over near the river so the fire lines don't hold you up."

The driver nodded. The cab moved forward. Cameron slumped low and kept half-closed eyes on the rubber mat on the cab floor. Tony Sanders spoke in a steady voice.

"Murdered?"

The city editor nodded. "Struck in the head — and two bullets. I called him at that precinct out there while Grindell was right beside me. That was the tip-off. I called him again, after Grindell left, but he'd gone. Grindell was using the phone, too. Britton had some time on his hands and he probably started for the blaze. What happened after that —"

He tossed the butt of his cigarette out a window. Sanders breathed softly:

"That dirty, killing —"

Cameron cut in sharply. "Take it easy. Don't do any guessing. I'll do the guessing. What I told you — you keep quiet. This is going to be tough. But I got Britton in the spot — and I'll get his killer —"

He checked himself. "You go over to the Detective Bureau and if Grindell's still there, just stick around. Keep out of his way. If he isn't there, find out when he got there and how long he stayed. And what excuse he made for being there — and fixing himself an alibi while Britton was getting the dose. But don't let anyone know what you're after."

Sanders said: "Okey."

They rode in silence until the cab crossed the bridge. Cameron said:

"Better get out here — grab another cab. When you get what I want — come into the office. You're not supposed to know anything about Britton being dead — unless they tell you at the Bureau."

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Sanders nodded, told the driver to stop. He opened the door on his side. Cameron said:

"Don't waste any time, but go at it easy, Tony."

The reporter nodded and slammed the door. The driver turned and looked back at Cameron.

"River and White — nothing there but sand barges," he breathed. "You sure —"

"I'm sure that's where I want to go," Cameron said steadily.

When Cameron got back to the editorial room it was almost midnight. Rallings was standing beside Vance, who slid out of Cameron's chair as he came around. Rallings said:

"Britton is dead — murdered. You know that?"

"What the hell do you think pulled me out of here tonight?" Cameron replied. "A picture show?"

Vance spoke from beside him. "We've got the fire stuff right, and the copy on Britton is there. Just what you told me — no more."

Cameron nodded. The managing editor spoke briskly.

"Any ideas about it, Jay? He was a good man. You had him on the *Green Fan* murder, didn't you?"

Cameron smiled grimly. "He was a good man and I had him on the *Green Fan* murder," he repeated. "I've got ideas, but that's all they are. Maybe I can make them facts."

Rallings said quietly: "They can't murder newspaper men in this town. We'll spend money and we'll use all our resources. When you get things straightened out come into my office and tell me what you know."

Cameron lifted his right fist and brought it down hard on the desk.

"I don't know anything," he said in a hard voice. "They *have* murdered newspaper men in this town. Britton isn't the first one. And they can spend money and use resources, too."

The managing editor frowned. "If you don't know anything — why were you outside tonight?" he asked.

Cameron drew a deep breath. "I had an idea — and I tried to stop something. I was too late. We've got to go easy or we won't get anywhere. I *think* some things, but there isn't any evidence. It would be a mess to rush in. I'm sorry as hell about it — and I'll get the murderers if I have to quit my job —"

Rallings said: "That's all right, but Britton's dead and the paper isn't. We've got to get it out. The police are working on the case and if they don't work hard enough we'll make them so sick —"

Cameron looked down at the copy before him. The managing editor let his words trail off and went towards his office. Cameron read copy and heads mechanically. When he looked up Vance was watching him closely. The copy reader said:

"Grindell?"

Cameron nodded. "He gave the word," he said slowly. "But he wasn't there. He was at the Detective Bureau — and he went there with Jake Collins. He happened to meet Collins

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outside the drug store. In the drug store he talked with me. Before that he was up here. He's covered. But he gave the word, Vance."

Vance said: "Are we going to *prove* it?"

Cameron shrugged.

"There's something wrong somewhere along the layout," he said slowly. "Britton swore he was telling me all he knew about the Carters' murder. Carters was a playboy with plenty of enemies. He gambled and he chased around with women. Someone got him. Britton told me that when he reached Carters he could distinguish only three words. 'Grindell sent me —' Just those three. Remember that, Vance. Grindell was the next one to reach Carters, but he was dead then. Grindell didn't know how much Britton knew. He may think that Britton talked to me, but he doesn't know I've talked to you."

Vance said thoughtfully: "Those three words might mean a lot — and they might mean nothing."

Cameron smiled bitterly. "I didn't tip the police to the words. I did tip them to the fact that they might not have gone at Grindell hard enough. I wanted to see if they'd go after him. They did — and he answered the questions."

Vance nodded slowly. "You figure that Grindell gave the word to finish Britton. Then he must have been pretty sure that Carters had said more than he actually said. If he'd known that Britton had only used those three words he wouldn't have been too worried."

The city editor spoke softly. "Right. Grindell either murdered Carters or knew who did and was protecting that person. He got worried and came in here to see how much I wanted Britton at his place. He was pretty sure Britton wasn't just working the Carters' murder. When I failed to call Britton off — Grindell worked fast. And he practically let me know it was coming."

Vance swore. "But the fact that Britton was sticking around the nightclub must have made Grindell wise — must have made him see that we didn't have enough on him."

Cameron frowned. "He decided not to risk it, or maybe he figured Britton had just enough to use to get closer. He wanted him pulled off. When I didn't do it — he decided to work fast."

Vance said: "That's closer to it."

Cameron looked over the heads of the reporters and saw Benson coming towards him. The River Precinct detective was medium in size, gray haired. He had a gray mustache and his eyes were the same color. He came around beside Cameron.

"Sorry as the devil, Jay," he said. "What do you think?"

Cameron shook his head. "He was a good newspaper man, and he'd been on some nasty assignments. I suppose he had enemies."

Benson said: "How about a woman being mixed up in it?"

The city editor shrugged. "I don't think so. But you never can tell."

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Benson looked at the city room clock. "The last human I can find who saw him was Young, the copper out in my precinct. He was coming in from the fire. He met Britton going towards it — that is, heading around behind it and going for the river. Britton said something about taking a quick look and keeping out of the smoke. It was pretty thick. The crowd was all around on the other side, because it could see more. Another thing — the street lights were out. The fire messed the wires up. The next thing was when the river men found the body."

Cameron tapped on the wood of the desk with his lean fingers.

Benson said slowly. "Doc says the bullets were .38's — fired at close range. He thinks he got the blow on the head first; it knocked him out. One bullet in the heart — the other lower. Not robbery. Twelve dollars and his watch on him." He paused. "That's all I have. He happened to be at the *Green Fan* when Carters was killed, didn't he?"

Cameron nodded. Benson said: "They aren't getting anywhere on the Carters' murder. But that was different. He was a fool spender with a lot of money. He was a gambler, too. Don't think there might be a tie-up, do you?"

The city editor narrowed his eyes. "In what way?" he asked.

Benson frowned. "He might have learned something that worried somebody," he said.

Cameron nodded. "He might have. But what, that worried who?"

Benson swore. "That's a tough crowd out there," he muttered. "Grindell is a louse — a cold and clever louse. He never knows any answers and he always shoots in self defense or has an alibi."

Cameron said nothing. Benson spoke quietly.

"How about a drink — when *thirty* comes in?"

The city editor shook his head. "I've had a drink — and *thirty* may be pretty late tonight. I'm going to move around, after I get out of here."

Benson watched Cameron closely. "Don't hold back on me, Jay," he said. "Britton was a good guy. If you're saving something for the paper —"

Cameron smiled grimly. "To hell with the paper!" he breathed. "I'm just going to move around. I move around better when I'm alone."

The plain-clothesman nodded slowly. "Carters — and now Britton. There was that Freese woman that got it yesterday, but she talked before she went out. That wasn't hard." He looked towards the wire machines, then back at Cameron. "Dead men don't talk," he said grimly.

Cameron slumped in his chair.

"That's one of the chief reasons that some of them get dead," he said.

It was one-thirty when Cameron left the River Precinct Station and turned down the street where Young had met Britton. There was the odor of burnt wood in the section and it

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was still fairly thick with smoke. The street lights were out. Cameron moved slowly and kept his eyes on the cracked pavement of the street. The section was a mean one.

When he heard light footfalls behind him he tightened his grip on the Colt, stopped and turned. A voice called to him, huskily:

"Mr. Cameron —"

The girl was moving rapidly towards him. She was slender and not very tall. A fire truck, a block distant, was turning; the lights of it swung across the girl's figure. She held her right arm out and there was a piece of paper in her hand. She said:

"I think you should — have this —"

She stopped and her fingers spread. The paper drifted downward as she turned away, started to run. Cameron called sharply:

"Wait — please!"

She didn't wait. She swung to the right and started to cross the street. Cameron moved forward, scooped up the paper and stuffed it in a pocket. He ran after the girl, gaining rapidly. When he was close to her he called:

"Better stop — I'll use lead —"

She stopped near a billboard and faced him with her back to it. The light was better; the billboard was near an avenue along which the street arcs were still shining. The girl had a white powdered face and very red lips. Her eyes were small and dark.

Cameron stood very close to her. "What's written on the paper?" he asked.

"I don't — know," she breathed.

Cameron said: "You know. What's written on the paper?"

Her eyes were suddenly defiant. She shook her head again. Her clothes fitted her figure tightly; she was cheaply dressed. She was pretty in a cheap, obvious way.

"How did you know I was Cameron?"

She smiled a little. "I didn't know, until I called your name. I just thought — you might be."

The city editor shook his head. "You're lying," he said.

She stood very straight, her eyes small. "I'm not lying! I went to the paper and a man said you might be at the fire or the police station out here. I came out and saw you leave the police station. I went back in and asked and the sergeant said it was you."

Cameron shook his head slowly. "You're still lying," he said quietly. "The sergeant isn't in the station just now, and no one at the paper would have told you I was out here."

She said: "Damn you!" in a rising tone and turned her body away from the billboard. Cameron caught her by an arm and shoved her back against it.

"Keep calm," he advised. "You can't be hurt for following me and calling my name. Or for dropping a piece of paper. What's written on it?"

There was defiance in her small eyes again. "Go back and pick it up!" she snapped.

The city editor smiled. "I've already picked it up," he replied. "If you won't tell me what's written on

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the paper — we'll go somewhere together, and I'll read it."

She said harshly: "Like hell we will!"

Cameron got the Colt from his right-hand pocket and watched her eyes widen on it. He backed away from her and turned so that light from the avenue struck over his shoulders. The girl said:

"I haven't done — anything —"

He nodded. "Maybe not, but you'd like to do something. You'd like to run away. I wouldn't."

He got the white paper from his other pocket with left-hand fingers and worked it open, keeping his eyes on the girl. He held the Colt low and close to his right side and lifted his left hand, keeping the spread paper below the level of his face.

The first time he lowered his eyes he read in rough, pencil printing: "*I know who killed Britton — see Carey on the Elsie beyond the Show Boat. Won't talk if you bring police.*"

The printing wasn't signed. He stuffed the paper back in his pocket.

"It's lousy," he said quietly. "Who was it thought I'd fall for this stuff?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what was written on it. I did what I was told. I've been hunting for you for an hour."

Cameron's brown eyes were smiling coldly. "We'll go around to the police station and coax the truth from you," he said softly.

There was fear in the girl's eyes.

"No!" she said. "I won't go —"

Cameron smiled more broadly. "Better be good, Kid," he suggested. "Tell me the truth and you won't get hurt — you won't have to go to the police station. If you don't —"

He moved closer to her. She said in a husky voice:

"I was home and a man called me. I don't know who he was. I never heard his voice before. He said to go downstairs — there was a folded piece of paper in my box. I was to give it to Cameron, city editor of the *Press*, and then I was to beat it. I was to do it right away. It was important."

Cameron said: "All right — what did you do?"

She was breathing slowly. "I got the paper and went to the *Press* office. A short man with red hair said you might be almost anywhere. I tried some places I thought you might be — and then I thought about the fire. I came out here and saw you leave the station. I wasn't sure at first, then I ran after you."

Cameron smiled. "What made you think you knew me?" he asked.

She said huskily. "I've seen you — across the river."

"Who were you with when I was pointed out?"

She smiled tightly. "A cop," she said. "I asked him who the good looking guy was and he said Cameron, city editor of the *Press*."

Cameron nodded slowly. "If you hadn't mentioned the good-looking part I wouldn't have believed you," he said sarcastically.

They stood silently, watching each other. Cameron's voice was hard.

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"Who do you *think* called you on the phone?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I never heard the voice before. I couldn't figure it."

The city editor put the Colt inside his right coat pocket

"Then why did you deliver the note?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Sometimes I'm called like that," she said very softly.

Cameron nodded. "Sure, and you know pretty well who calls you. Who?"

She looked at the sidewalk. "I never know," she replied.

The city editor swore. "Listen, Kid," he said evenly, "I'm going to be nice to you. I'm going to play you haven't read the writing on the paper. A reporter of mine named Britton was murdered tonight."

He paused as a fire truck made a siren racket as it approached the avenue. It went past and turned southward. When the sound of it had died the girl said slowly:

"Murdered? That's terrible."

Cameron nodded. "It's bad," he agreed. "The point of this note is that the fellow who wrote it knows who murdered this reporter. I'm to go to a certain spot and he'll tell me who did it."

She was silent for several seconds, her eyes on his.

"I didn't know," she stated finally.

"You're not curious," he mocked. "A voice you've never heard tells you where to find a note and who to give it to — and you don't give a damn what's written."

She shrugged. Cameron said: "All right — only be careful. If you hear a strange voice again tonight, after you get home or somewhere — just say that Cameron got the note and thought it was funny. Funny as hell. Tell the owner of the strange voice that I said I'd come right along to the *Elsie*, whatever that is, and that I'd come without any cops and unarmed. I'll sort of back into the place, tell your caller — so that the bullets can get me without any chance of my seeing who's using them."

He smiled coldly. "All right — trot along!" he said.

Her eyes were staring into his. She stood straight, her hands clenched.

"You're not —"

She stopped, and Cameron's brown eyes smiled, a mocking, bitter smile.

"No, I'm not following instructions," he said. "I'm taking a chance that the note isn't on the level. I'll find the killer of Britton another way. And a safer one."

The girl raised her narrow shoulders and let them fall. She moved out from the billboard, watching him closely. He turned as she walked past him, facing her.

"It's a tough racket, Kid," he said. "Better quit it before it's too late."

She raised her shoulders and let them fall, again. She didn't speak, and she didn't look back at him. At the corner of the avenue she turned southward and he lost sight of her.

Cameron breathed: "Might have dragged her along to the precinct —"

He heard the sound of a car engine,

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highly accelerated. It came from the avenue and the direction the girl had taken. It wasn't the sound of a car in motion. The self starter had just worked and the engine was being tested. The sound died away.

Ten feet away was a break in the billboard fence. Cameron started for it, moving fast. He was several feet from it when the car swung around the corner from the avenue. He glanced over his right shoulder and saw the black color of it. At the same instant the car's headlights went out. Cameron reached the break in the fence. It was narrow; he was squeezing his body through when the guns started to bark. He could hear the bullets thud into the pavement and the dirt near the fence. They made crackling sounds as they struck the wood.

His soft hat jerked on his head as he let his body drop. He struck dirt, rolled over once, dropped several feet to the level of the fenced-in lot. The bank of dirt between him and the fence saved him. Lead made seconds of racket, battering and tearing at the fence. Then the gun clatter died away; engine sound replaced it. A police whistle shrilled, somewhere along the avenue.

Cameron pulled himself to his feet, found his hat. His fingers found a hole in its highest fold. He brushed dirt from his clothes, heard the engine roar die in the distance, towards the fire and the river. He climbed up the bank of dirt and squeezed back through the fence break again.

Feet were making pounding noise on the pavement in fast time. Cameron stood looking down the street, but the speeding car was out of sight. He went towards the avenue, glancing at the bullet marked billboard. The big figure of Johnny Bestor came up to him.

"Gun racket?" the detective breathed heavily.

Cameron nodded. "Plenty of it," he said. "A black, closed car. Turned the corner here, got the headlights out, and let loose. Two guns, I think. Went east towards the river."

Bestor swore. "Who'd they get?" he breathed.

Cameron shook his head. "Nobody," he replied. "They tried to get me."

Bestor whistled softly. "How in hell did they miss?" he asked.

Cameron smiled. "I got through a break in the fence and down in a ditch. I heard them coming — had a hunch. It was pretty close."

Bestor swore again. "It was close, all right," he muttered. "But I'm damned if it was pretty!"

At two-thirty Cameron walked through the fake grape arbor of the *Green Fan* and reached the entrance. The doorman did his job and the city editor got inside. Cline blinked at him, then smiled and came forward.

"Back again, Mr. Cameron?"

"Yeah," Cameron replied. "Grindell around?"

"In his office. I think. You'd like to see him?"

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Cameron shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "But I *have* to see him."

Cline's eyes were expressionless. "Business, eh?" he said pleasantly. "Just a minute."

He turned away and went back past the phone booth and the check room. There was a narrow corridor beyond. He went along it and mounted the stairs at the end. The music played very loudly and a youngster with rouge on his right cheek chased a girl out into the grape arbor.

Cameron thought of Britton and something hurt somewhere around his heart. He moved a few feet and looked out at the crowded floor.

Cline came towards him, smiling. "Grindell says to go right on up. Down the corridor all the way, then to the left and up. First door at top."

Cameron said: "Thanks."

He lighted a cigarette, went slowly past the phone booth and along the corridor. When he climbed the stairs he got his right hand in the gun pocket, closed the fingers of it over the grip. The door was closed and he knocked on the wood with left-hand knuckles.

Grindell called: "Come on in."

Cameron opened the door and went inside. When he closed it behind him he used his left hand. Grindell's black eyes saw that, and he looked at Cameron's right pocket. The office was small. There was a desk, two chairs and a divan. The walls had photographs of people in dinner clothes and of dancing girls not in dinner clothes.

Grindell said: "I expected you. I'm sorry to hear about Britton."

The city editor stood with his back to the door. "Naturally," he replied. "It's pretty tough."

Grindell ran a big hand through his bushy hair. His lips seemed straighter and thinner than ever.

"It just goes to show you that it doesn't pay to joke," he said a little thickly. "You might have thought I was really sore, up in your place tonight. Might have figured I'd get Britton, the way I was putting things."

"I might have," Cameron agreed.

There was a short silence, then Grindell said:

"I can give you a tip, Cameron."

The city editor nodded. "Fine," he said tonelessly.

Grindell was watching his right coat pocket as he spoke.

"Carters was a foolish guy. He liked to gamble but he didn't always like to pay. There were some pretty important boys in town from Chicago last week. I hear some things, you know. Some things you might not hear, even on your job. I hear Carters played and lost a lot. But he didn't feel like paying. Claimed it wasn't on the level. They threatened him, but he didn't pay. So they got sore and let him have it. Britton happened to be around, and Carters may have mentioned some names. This bunch learned that Britton was with Carters when he died, so they played safe — they got Britton."

Cameron smiled with his lips tight-

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pressed. Then he opened his mouth very slowly and yawned.

"Lousy," he said simply.

The night-club owner straightened in his chair. Red showed through the oily yellow of his skin.

He said in a hard tone: "You don't like it, Cameron?"

The city editor shook his head. "I wouldn't like it even if someone besides yourself had thought it up," he replied coldly.

"Going to try and drag me into it, Cameron?" Grindell asked.

Cameron shook his head. "No," he replied. "I just came in to tell you something. About thirty minutes ago they pulled Nan Boggs' body out of the Allegheny."

Grindell's knuckles got white on the arms of his desk chair. His body lifted a little, then sagged. He breathed very slowly, through his nose. Then he smiled.

"Nan Boggs, eh?" he muttered. "It seems to me — I remember the name."

Cameron smiled almost pleasantly. "You should," he stated. "She was your particular girl friend for a couple of years, until you got fed up with her. But you never got so fed up with her that you couldn't use her now and then — on business matters."

Grindell stood up and said harshly: "Now, listen — Cameron — I don't have to take —"

"Now listen, Grindell —" the city editor's voice was steady — "you sit down and let me do the talking."

The cloth of his right pocket moved slightly and Grindell looked at the shaped-out bulge of the Colt. He sat down heavily.

Cameron said in a quiet tone: "The police tell me the girl'd been using coke. She bungled her job tonight and someone didn't think you'd mind much if they finished her. So they did."

Grindell half-closed his black eyes. "What job?" he breathed.

The city editor smiled thinly. "The job on me," he replied. "The play to get me down along the river, to a barge called the *Elsie*, if I was that dumb. And if I wasn't that dumb, and it didn't look as though I were to fall for it, the idea was to get me on the street."

The night-club owner looked puzzled. "Someone tried to get you?" he muttered.

Cameron nodded. "That's it. Now you're thinking fast. Several of them tried to get me. If I'd gone to the *Elsie* — they'd have done it without too much trouble, unless I'd brought cops along. And then they'd have waited. The girl was shaky and lost her nerve before she got to me. She wasn't cool enough. You probably spoiled her, Grindell."

The night-club owner shrugged. "I remember the Boggs girl," he said. "Haven't seen her in months."

Cameron looked at Grindell's hands. "Why don't you go down to the morgue and take a look?" he suggested.

Grindell half-closed his eyes. "What do you suppose they wanted to get *you* for, Cameron?" he said softly.

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The city editor looked at Grindell's eyes. His own held a hard smile.

"They figured that Britton knew who had killed Carters, or was pretty close to it. They got him. And then someone was very bright and figured he might have told me."

Grindell nodded his big head very slowly. "That's just about what it was," he said. "Sure."

Cameron looked at Grindell's hands again. "Sure," he repeated. "Sure as hell, Grindell. But why would *gamblers* worry about *me?* They might get Britton; but what would make them think I knew what he knew?"

"They were just trying to play safe," Grindell said.

The city editor stopped smiling. "*You* were just trying to play safe, Grindell," he said steadily.

The night-club owner stared at him. His lips twitched and he started to smile. Cameron said:

"Don't laugh too soon, Grindell. That's the way you've been working this — getting in close and laughing. Staying right alongside of me, and figuring you could do the job so perfectly you couldn't be touched."

Grindell chuckled hoarsely. His eyes got suddenly hard and he gestured towards the door.

"Outside, Cameron!" he ordered. "Down the corridor and to the right. Just keep going —"

Cameron took the gun out of his pocket and held it low at his right side. Grindell stopped talking and look at it. The city editor spoke quietly.

"Remember the title of the book you saw on one of my men's desks?" he asked. "It was '*Dead Men Tell No Tales.*' "

Grindell frowned at the gun. "Good book?" he asked.

Cameron said: "I don't know — I never read books. But it's a lousy title. Because dead men *do* tell tales."

The faint beat of the dance orchestra came into the room. Cameron was smiling again, a hard, unpleasant smile. Grindell looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"And you're going to hear a dead man tell one — in a few minutes," Cameron said. "I don't think you're going to like it, either."

The night-club owner put his left hand on the edge of the desk and his fingers jerked a little.

"I don't know what you're getting at, Cameron," he said harshly.

The city editor's eyes were very cold. "I'm going to play a phonograph record for you," he said softly. "It isn't a jazz record. The recording isn't perfect, but you'll recognize the voice. It'll be Britton's."

Grindell's fingers stopped tapping the wood of the desk. His thin lips parted and he breathed slowly through his mouth. Cameron said:

"I got the record through the mail, yesterday. Britton made it right after he learned what he talked about. He always has fooled around with discs, making his own. But you know that."

Grindell said shakily, "How in hell — would I know anything about what Britton did?"

Cameron's smile went away. "Be-

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cause he became important to you, Grindell," he said very slowly. "You murdered Carters, and when you doubled back, after getting rid of the gun, you found Britton at Carters' side.

"You asked Britton questions, but his answers didn't suit you. You were pretty sure Britton knew something. And he did. He came in and told me what he knew. We both figured he was in a bad spot. We both knew you were a killer. So Britton went to his place and made the record. Then he sent it through the mails to me. It's a good record. But you won't like it."

Grindell's black eyes were staring at Cameron's. The city editor said slowly and softly, his voice coming above the beat of the dance orchestra:

"Carters said to Britton: 'Grindell sent me this load — he's been cheating on me, running my place here. Grindell got me.' That's on the record, in Britton's words. And there are other things on the record, Grindell. Britton tells what you asked him, after you came out and found him with Carters. He gives his replies. You were anxious, Grindell — damn' anxious. And at the end of the disc Britton suggests that if anything should happen to him that looked like murder — the first part of the record explains who murdered, and why."

Grindell said hoarsely. "It's a lie — a rotten, dirty —"

Cameron smiled with his eyes almost closed. "Carters was running this place, backing it. I've known that for months. You were cheating on him and he found it out. So you got him right out here, and tried to make it look like something else. Britton blundered in, and that made it tough. You finished him, and you tried to finish me. You weren't worried about what I know, but you knew that with Britton dead I'd go after his killer until I got him. You thought I might run into something."

Grindell touched his fingers against desk wood and breathed evenly and slowly.

Cameron spoke quietly. "I've got the record at the paper. We'll pick up a couple of dicks and go over there. Then we'll dig up a phonograph and all sit around and listen. After that — things will move fast. It may take five or six months, at that. But you're taking the drop for *this* one, Grindell."

Grindell's left-hand fingers trailed along the wood of the desk and Cameron saw the button they were moving towards. He said sharply:

"Never mind that stuff, Grindell! When I said we'd pick up a couple of detectives I didn't mean we'd have to go far to do it. There's one in the corridor and a couple more in the foyer. You weren't bright enough, Grindell."

Grindell let his body sag forward, as though he were going down in a faint. When his knees had almost touched the floor he leaped forward. Cameron squeezed the trigger of the Colt once, and the room was filled with crash sound. Cameron twisted

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his body to one side and Grindell battered against the wall. He went down to the floor heavily, rolled over. But his right hand was digging under his left armpit as he rolled. Cameron said:

"No —"

He backed away slowly, caught the glint of steel in the office light. He squeezed the trigger of the Colt the second time. Wood of the desk spurted close to him as Grindell's gun made racket on top of the second crash. Cameron lowered the muzzle of the Colt and fired for the third time.

There were shouts and footfalls beyond the room, in the corridor. Through the drifting smoke Cameron saw Grindell's gun slip from his fingers. The big man said weakly:

"Don't — I've had — enough —"

The door swung open and Benson came in, gun in his right hand. He looked down at Grindell.

Cameron said: "He came for me, and I let him have it. He murdered Carters because Carters had caught him cheating out here and he was in a bad spot. It looked easy, but Britton blundered into things. Grindell had him finished."

Grindell said weakly, from the floor: "Carters was no good — he was born to be cheated on. I wouldn't go to stir — for him — so I — got him. Two of us did the — job on Britton — but you'll never know the other name — not from me. Britton knew — too much."

He smiled up at Cameron, weakly, twistedly. "Dead men — don't talk —" he breathed in a whisper. "That is — not much —"

His head and shoulders swayed, he fell heavily to the right. Cameron lowered his gun arm slowly and Benson bent over the club owner. He straightened slowly.

"Finished," he said.

Cameron nodded. Benson was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

"What did he mean by that last 'not much —'?" he asked.

The city editor said tonelessly. "I bluffed him into getting scared enough to try a break for it. I told him Britton had made a disc of Carters' last words. And I told him I had the disc, and that Britton said on it that Carters had told him Grindell was his killer. And I told him that Britton said on the disc that if anything happened to him it would be easy to figure why."

Benson blinked. "And there wasn't any disc?" he said huskily.

Cameron shook his head. "I remembered that Britton had a pretty fair voice. And he made records of it on a cheap little machine he had. A couple of them were pretty good. That gave me the idea — the rest was bluff."

Benson swore softly. "I had an idea Grindell was mixed up in it," he breathed. "But I didn't see how we were going to hang it on him. He was a tricky guy."

Cameron looked down at the club owner's body. "The trickiest ones get scared," he said simply.

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Has it ever occurred to you that detectives are human beings, even as you and I? That their lives are not all blood and clues? That they have emotional thoughts as well as deductive ones? Yes — there is such a thing as the private life of a detective. Frederick Hazlitt Brennan tells us of Detective Sergeant Brady's feelings on his last day in harness, after thirty-nine years of unswerving loyalty to his job. . . .

AWARD OF HONOR

by FREDERICK HAZLITT BRENNAN

LAST day on the force. Yep, last day. Last six minutes, to be exact. Detective Sergeant Brady squinted up at the clock; its time-speckled face was like that of an old friend. The detectives' room at headquarters was almost deserted. McHugh and Lafferty, two of the younger men, were consulting with a Bertillon clerk. They were very busy, very much absorbed. The bureau had not yet cracked a politician's murder in the West End.

Brady sighed. He must remember that. Yep, that was why McHugh had said briskly, in passing, "This your last day, Sergeant? Sorry to see you retiring." Sure, sure. They were all busy. That was why the chief hadn't sent for him for a little talk. The chief remembered the day all right. Why he and the chief had been policemen together for thirty-nine years. It was the big murder case. Only a few minutes ago the flyer squad had gone out of the alley with the siren cut loose. No doubt the chief had gone with them. Sure.

Well, he'd better finish clearing out his desk. He got to his feet a bit heavily. He stared at a fresh letter on the top of the pile. It was a form letter from the Board of Police Commissioners taking note of the fact that "Sergeant Daniel Brady would on this day, having reached the retirement age, sever active relations with the police department." The letter added, in faded blue mimeographed script, that "on behalf of the board the president wishes to thank you for your excellent record of service."

Something choked up his throat — not sentiment, but a vague anger. He reached for the letter, started to crumple it. Nope. Mary would like to keep it. Mary would frame it. Yep, he'd take it home to Mary. How many minutes more? Should he leave now? The chief was out. He didn't want to see Captain Cullinane. Bad 'cess to um. The black, crooked heart of um. Well, anyway, he knew what Dan Brady thought of him. A crooked policeman is lower than a gangster. The chief knew . . . you couldn't fool the chief. He'd have Cullinane's hide before. . . .

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"Brady! You're wanted in the chief's office."

Ha! The chief hadn't forgot. Brady smoothed the wrinkles from his baggy gray suit coat. He walked down the corridor to the chief's office, slicking his thin, reddish-white hair with a nervous hand. The chief would remind him of the time they had gone together into Hop Alley to get that cokey guy . . . and the time he had won that reward for putting the handcuffs on Dutch Hayes and bringing him in despite a couple of slugs in his chest . . . the slugs still twinged when Brady drew too deep a breath. . . .

"The chief sent for me?"

A brash young clerk looked up.

"You, Brady? Listen . . . you got this application for your pension all balled up . . . fill in all *them* blanks and attach your good conduct certificate there . . . see?"

"Oh . . . yep . . . I'm sorry, son . . . uh . . . the chief in?"

"Naw. He had to go see the big boss. Mail your correct application, and you better make it snappy so's it can be reviewed."

Nodding, Brady shuffled out. Yep, the chief was just busy. Sure. With this big case on and all. . . . Captain Cullinane approached him in the corridor.

"Oh . . . uh . . . Brady. Understand you're leaving us today? Sorry to see you leaving the force, Brady."

Brady nodded again, and growled something down in his throat. Yep. Sorry! Devil take um. He was sorry. Sorry and grinning to his ears. . . .

A voice called out, "Hey, Sergeant!"

He halted. It was Pierson, grizzled headquarters man for the *News*. Pierson looked embarrassed.

"Say, Sarge, we tried to give you a send-off. All the boys sent stories in. But the papers are tighter'n a tick, with all this Page One news breaking. But I got a promise that they'll run something in a day or so."

"Aw, that's okay, Jimmy," said Brady. The reporter started to say something more, but a jangling phone pulled him away. Brady walked on back to the detectives' room. Time to go now. Yep. He'd stayed right up to the last second. He began, with clumsy fingers, to pick up the odds and ends on his desk — his battered report book, mysterious keys, notes and memoranda, letters in greasy, tattered envelopes. . . . Each meant something — they were the months and weeks and days of his duty as a policeman. . . . Oh, well, too bad about the papers. It would have pleased Mary. Himself . . . shucks . . . he'd never been a newspaper copper. But just the same . . . was this all? . . . Just walking out like an unwelcome visitor? Why, he'd been a *good* copper. He'd always done his duty and more.

"Hey, Sergeant. Limpy Snowbird . . . you know . . . that punk of the Jellyroll Mob . . . he left this at the desk for you."

Brady stared at the young patrolman. In his hands was what looked to be a potted flower, tied in white tissue paper with a pink ribbon.

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"Shall I duck it in the sink, before —"

"Naw. I'll open it. Thanks."

Fumblingly he tore away the wrappings. Then he snorted. It was a flower pot filled with garbage. Sticking in the center of the mess was a withered bologna and pinned to it was a note scrawled on filthy paper.

His lips moving, Sergeant Brady read this message:

"We're glad you're leaving, you ——— — ———! You can't go two soon to suit us you big mick ———! This will be a good rackit when you're gone, you dirty Irish ——— — ———! You know who."

Suddenly, Brady smiled. He sniffed the pot as if it contained some fine perfume. Carefully, he folded the note and placed it between the pages of his ragged leather report book, his fingers tucking it in reverently as if it were a citation for valor.

"Q"

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SPECIAL PRIZE FOR THE BEST FIRST STORY

Stanley Ellin is thirty-one, married, and has one daughter. He is a New Yorker. He graduated from college in 1936, worked on a newspaper for a while, turned to writing radio scripts, and then moved into steel work. He served a short hitch in the army and during his spare time there wrote the first draft of a short story called "The Specialty of the House." On his discharge he polished up the story, submitted it to EQMM, was sent a long letter of criticism asking for certain revisions, agreed with the changes requested by your Editor, revised the story, resubmitted it — and then experienced that indescribable thrill of having his first story accepted. Not only that, but your Editor suggested that the story be entered in EQMM's Third Annual Prize Contest, and ultimately it won a Special Prize for the Best First Story. We now learn that after our acceptance of "The Specialty of the House," Mr. Ellin proceeded to write a novel. And in due course he submitted his first novel to Simon & Schuster, who promptly bought it. The novel, DREADFUL SUMMIT, *was published in March 1948, as an Inner Sanctum Suspense Special (Mr. Ellin has a knack, it seems, for producing stories which editors label "special"). So, as things turned out — the publishing business is Topsyturvyland — Mr. Ellin's second work (his novel) appeared in print ahead of his first work (the short story).*

In notifying your Editor of his sale to Simon & Schuster, Mr. Ellin wrote the following beautiful words: "When you accepted my first short story and took the personal interest in me that you did, you supplied me with the impetus to write the book. It is hard to find words to thank the man who has changed the course of your life and made it look considerably brighter than you ever imagined . . . I can only hope that you know how I feel." (Editor's Note: We do indeed!)

Now, may we quote in full the short note which Mr. Ellin attached to his first submission of "The Specialty of the House":

"Anyone who has ever brooded over the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce, Judge Crater, and others under ultra mysterious conditions, will find this story of the gravest import.

"It tells all."

(Editor's Note: It does indeed!)

Mr. Ellin's idea of an ideal workroom is "Proust's cork-lined chamber plus a typewriter." Why cork-lined? Is cork easier on the head when a writer begins pounding it against the wall?

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(*Editorial comment on preceding page*)

THE SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE

by STANLEY ELLIN

"AND THIS," said Laffler, "is Sbirro's." Costain saw a square brownstone façade identical with the others that extended from either side into the clammy darkness of the deserted street. From the barred windows of the basement at his feet, a glimmer of light showed behind heavy curtains.

"Lord," he observed, "it's a dismal hole, isn't it?"

"I beg you to understand," said Laffler stiffly, "that Sbirro's is the restaurant without pretensions. Beseiged by these ghastly, neurotic times, it has refused to compromise. It is perhaps the last important establishment in this city lit by gas jets. Here you will find the same honest furnishings, the same magnificent Sheffield service, and possibly, in a far corner, the very same spider webs that were remarked by the patrons of a half century ago!"

"A doubtful recommendation," said Costain, "and hardly sanitary."

"When you enter," Laffler continued, "you leave the insanity of this year, this day, and this hour, and you find yourself for a brief span restored in spirit, not by opulence, but by dignity, which is the lost quality of our time."

Costain laughed uncomfortably. "You make it sound more like a cathedral than a restaurant," he said.

In the pale reflection of the street lamp overhead, Laffler peered at his companion's face. "I wonder," he said abruptly, "whether I have not made a mistake in extending this invitation to you."

Costain was hurt. Despite an impressive title and large salary, he was no more than clerk to this pompous little man, but he was impelled to make some display of his feelings. "If you wish," he said coldly, "I can make other plans for my evening with no trouble."

With his large, cowlike eyes turned up to Costain, the mist drifting into the ruddy, full moon of his face, Laffler seemed strangely ill at ease. Then "No, no," he said at last, "absolutely not. It's important that you dine at Sbirro's with me." He grasped Costain's arm firmly and led the way to the wrought-iron gate of the basement. "You see, you're the sole person in my office who seems to know anything at all about good food. And on my part, knowing about Sbirro's but not having some appreciative friend to share it, is like having a unique piece of art locked in a room where no one else can enjoy it."

Costain was considerably mollified by this. "I understand there are a great many people who relish that situation."

"I'm not one of that kind!" Laffler said sharply. "And having the secret of Sbirro's locked in myself for years has finally become unendurable." He

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fumbled at the side of the gate and from within could be heard the small, discordant jangle of an ancient pull-bell. An interior door opened with a groan, and Costain found himself peering into a dark face whose only discernible feature was a row of gleaming teeth.

"Sair?" said the face.

"Mr. Laffler and a guest."

"Sair," the face said again, this time in what was clearly an invitation. It moved aside and Costain stumbled down a single step behind his host. The door and gate creaked behind him, and he stood blinking in a small foyer. It took him a moment to realize that the figure he now stared at was his own reflection in a gigantic pier glass that extended from floor to ceiling. "Atmosphere," he said under his breath and chuckled as he followed his guide to a seat.

He faced Laffler across a small table for two and peered curiously around the dining room. It was no size at all, but the half dozen guttering gas jets which provided the only illumination threw such a deceptive light that the walls flickered and faded into uncertain distance.

There were no more than eight or ten tables about, arranged to insure the maximum privacy. All were occupied, and the few waiters serving them moved with quiet efficiency. In the air was a soft clash and scrape of cutlery and a soothing murmur of talk. Costain nodded appreciatively.

Laffler breathed an audible sigh of gratification. "I knew you would share my enthusiasm," he said. "Have you noticed, by the way, that there are no women present?"

Costain raised inquiring eyebrows.

"Sbirro," said Laffler, "does not encourage members of the fair sex to enter the premises. And, I can tell you, his method is decidedly effective. I had the experience of seeing a woman get a taste of it not long ago. She sat at a table for not less than an hour waiting for service which was never forthcoming."

"Didn't she make a scene?"

"She did." Laffler smiled at the recollection. "She succeeded in annoying the customers, embarrassing her partner, and nothing more."

"And what about Mr. Sbirro?"

"He did not make an appearance. Whether he directed affairs from behind the scenes, or was not even present during the episode, I don't know. Whichever it was, he won a complete victory. The woman never reappeared nor, for that matter, did the witless gentleman who by bringing her was really the cause of the entire contretemps."

"A fair warning to all present," laughed Costain.

A waiter now appeared at the table. The chocolate-dark skin, the thin, beautifully molded nose and lips, the large liquid eyes, heavily lashed, and the silver white hair so heavy and silken that it lay on the skull like a cap, all marked him definitely as an East Indian of some sort, Costain decided. The man arranged the stiff table linen, filled two tumblers from a

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huge, cut-glass pitcher, and set them in their proper places.

"Tell me," Laffler said eagerly, "is the special being served this evening?"

The waiter smiled regretfully and showed teeth as spectacular as those of the majordomo. "I am so sorry, sair. There is no special this evening."

Laffler's face fell into lines of heavy disappointment. "After waiting so long. It's been a month already, and I hoped to show my friend here . . ."

"You understand the difficulties, sair."

"Of course, of course." Laffler looked at Costain sadly and shrugged. "You see, I had in mind to introduce you to the greatest treat that Sbirro's offers, but unfortunately it isn't on the menu this evening."

The waiter said: "Do you wish to be served now, sair?" and Laffler nodded. To Costain's surprise the waiter made his way off without waiting for any instructions.

"Have you ordered in advance?" he asked.

"Ah," said Laffler, "I really should have explained. Sbirro's offers no choice whatsoever. You will eat the same meal as everyone else in this room. Tomorrow evening you would eat an entirely different meal, but again without designating a single preference."

"Very unusual," said Costain, "and certainly unsatisfactory at times. What if one doesn't have a taste for the particular dish set before him?"

"On that score," said Laffler solemnly, "you need have no fears. I give you my word that no matter how exacting your tastes, you will relish every mouthful you eat in Sbirro's."

Costain looked doubtful, and Laffler smiled. "And consider the subtle advantages of the system," he said. "When you pick up the menu of a popular restaurant, you find yourself confronted with innumerable choices. You are forced to weigh, to evaluate, to make uneasy decisions which you may instantly regret. The effect of all this is a tension which, however slight, must make for discomfort.

"And consider the mechanics of the process. Instead of a hurly-burly of sweating cooks rushing about a kitchen in a frenzy to prepare a hundred varying items, we have a chef who stands serenely alone, bringing all his talents to bear on one task, with all assurance of a complete triumph!"

"Then you have seen the kitchen?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Laffler sadly. "The picture I offer is hypothetical, made of conversational fragments I have pieced together over the years. I must admit, though, that my desire to see the functioning of the kitchen here comes very close to being my sole obsession nowadays."

"But have you mentioned this to Sbirro?"

"A dozen times. He shrugs the suggestion away."

"Isn't that a rather curious foible on his part?"

"No, no," Laffler said hastily, "a master artist is never under the compulsion of petty courtesies. Still,"

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he sighed, "I have never given up hope."

The waiter now reappeared bearing two soup bowls which he set in place with mathematical exactitude, and a small tureen from which he slowly ladled a measure of clear, thin broth. Costain dipped his spoon into the broth and tasted it with some curiosity. It was delicately flavored, bland to the verge of tastelessness. Costain frowned, tentatively reached for the salt and pepper cellars, and discovered there were none on the table. He looked up, saw Laffler's eyes on him, and although unwilling to compromise with his own tastes, he hesitated to act as a damper on Laffler's enthusiasm. Therefore he smiled and indicated the broth.

"Excellent," he said.

Laffler returned his smile. "You do not find it excellent at all," he said coolly. "You find it flat and badly in need of condiments. I know this," he continued as Costain's eyebrows shot upward, "because it was my own reaction many years ago, and because like yourself I found myself reaching for salt and pepper after the first mouthful. I also learned with surprise that condiments are not available in Sbirro's."

Costain was shocked. "Not even salt!" he exclaimed.

"Not even salt. The very fact that you require it for your soup stands as evidence that your taste is unduly jaded. I am confident that you will now make the same discovery that I did: by the time you have nearly finished your soup, your desire for salt will be nonexistent."

Laffler was right; before Costain had reached the bottom of his plate, he was relishing the nuances of the broth with steadily increasing delight. Laffler thrust aside his own empty bowl and rested his elbows on the table. "Do you agree with me now?"

"To my surprise," said Costain, "I do."

As the waiter busied himself clearing the table, Laffler lowered his voice significantly. "You will find," he said, "that the absence of condiments is but one of several noteworthy characteristics which mark Sbirro's. I may as well prepare you for these. For example, no alcoholic beverages of any sort are served here, nor for that matter any beverage except clear, cold water, the first and only drink necessary for a human being."

"Outside of mother's milk," suggested Costain dryly.

"I can answer that in like vein by pointing out that the average patron of Sbirro's has passed that primal stage of his development."

Costain laughed. "Granted," he said.

"Very well. There is also a ban on the use of tobacco in any form."

"But good heavens," said Costain, "doesn't that make Sbirro's more a teetotaler's retreat than a gourmet's sanctuary?"

"I fear," said Laffler solemnly, "that you confuse the words, *gourmet* and *gourmand*. The gourmand, through glutting himself, requires a wider and

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wider latitude of experience to stir his surfeited senses, but the very nature of the gourmet is simplicity. The ancient Greek in his coarse chiton savoring the ripe olive; the Japanese in his bare room contemplating the curve of a single flower stem — these are the true gourmets."

"But an occasional drop of brandy, or pipeful of tobacco," said Costain dubiously, "are hardly overindulgences."

"By alternating stimulant and narcotic," said Laffler, "you seesaw the delicate balance of your taste so violently that it loses its most precious quality: the appreciation of fine food. During my years as a patron of Sbirro's, I have proved this to my satisfaction."

"May I ask," said Costain, "why you regard the ban on these things as having such deep esthetic motives? What about such mundane reasons as the high cost of a liquor license, or the possibility that patrons would object to the smell of tobacco in such confined quarters?"

Laffler shook his head violently. "If and when you meet Sbirro," he said, "you will understand at once that he is not the man to make decisions on a mundane basis. As a matter of fact, it was Sbirro himself who first made me cognizant of what you call 'esthetic' motives."

"An amazing man," said Costain as the waiter prepared to serve the entrée.

Laffler's next words were not spoken until he had savored and swallowed a large portion of meat. "I hesitate to use superlatives," he said, "but to my way of thinking, Sbirro represents man at the apex of his civilization!"

Costain cocked an eyebrow and applied himself to his roast which rested in a pool of stiff gravy ungarnished by green or vegetable. The thin steam rising from it carried to his nostrils a subtle, tantalizing odor which made his mouth water. He chewed a piece as slowly and thoughtfully as if he were analyzing the intricacies of a Mozart symphony. The range of taste he discovered was really extraordinary, from the pungent nip of the crisp outer edge to the peculiarly flat yet soul-satisfying ooze of blood which the pressure of his jaws forced from the half-raw interior.

Upon swallowing he found himself ferociously hungry for another piece, and then another, and it was only with an effort that he prevented himself from wolfing down all his share of the meat and gravy without waiting to get the full voluptuous satisfaction from each mouthful. When he had scraped his platter clean, he realized that both he and Laffler had completed the entire course without exchanging a single word. He commented on this, and Laffler said: "Can you see any need for words in the presence of such food?"

Costain looked around at the shabby, dimly lit room, the quiet diners, with a new perception. "No," he said humbly, "I cannot. For any doubts I had I apologize unreservedly. In all your praise of Sbirro's there was not

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a single word of exaggeration."

"Ah," said Laffler delightedly. "And that is only part of the story. You heard me mention the special which unfortunately was not on the menu tonight. What you have just eaten is as nothing when compared to the absolute delights of that special!"

"Good Lord!" cried Costain; "What is it? Nightingale's tongues? Filet of unicorn?"

"Neither," said Laffler. "It is lamb."

"Lamb?"

Laffler remained lost in thought for a minute. "If," he said at last, "I were to give you in my own unstinted words my opinion of this dish, you would judge me completely insane. That is how deeply the mere thought of it affects me. It is neither the fatty chop, nor the too solid leg; it is, instead, a select portion of the rarest sheep in existence and is named after the species — lamb Amirstan."

Costain knit his brows. "Amirstan?"

"A fragment of desolation almost lost on the border which separates Afghanistan and Russia. From chance remarks dropped by Sbirro, I gather it is no more than a plateau which grazes the pitiful remnants of a flock of superb sheep. Sbirro, through some means or other, obtained rights to the traffic in this flock and is, therefore, the sole restaurateur ever to have lamb Amirstan on his bill of fare. I can tell you that the appearance of this dish is a rare occurrence indeed, and luck is the only guide in determining for the clientele the exact date when it will be served."

"But surely," said Costain, "Sbirro could provide some advance knowledge of this event."

"The objection to that is simply stated," said Laffler. "There exists in this city a huge number of professional gluttons. Should advance information slip out, it is quite likely that they will, out of curiosity, become familiar with the dish and thenceforth supplant the regular patrons at these tables."

"But you don't mean to say," objected Costain, "that these few people present are the only ones in the entire city, or for that matter, in the whole wide world, who know of the existence of Sbirro's!"

"Very nearly. There may be one or two regular patrons who, for some reason, are not present at the moment."

"That's incredible."

"It is done," said Laffler, the slightest shade of menace in his voice, "by every patron making it his solemn obligation to keep the secret. By accepting my invitation this evening, you automatically assume that obligation. I hope you can be trusted with it."

Costain flushed. "My position in your employ should vouch for me. I only question the wisdom of a policy which keeps such magnificent food away from so many who would enjoy it."

"Do you know the inevitable result of the policy *you* favor?" asked Laffler bitterly. "An influx of idiots who would nightly complain that they are

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never served roast duck with chocolate sauce. Is that picture tolerable to you?"

"No," admitted Costain, "I am forced to agree with you."

Laffler leaned back in his chair wearily and passed his hand over his eyes in an uncertain gesture. "I am a solitary man," he said quietly, "and not by choice alone. It may sound strange to you, it may border on eccentricity, but I feel to my depths that this restaurant, this warm haven in a coldly insane world, is both family and friend to me."

And Costain, who to this moment had never viewed his companion as other than tyrannical employer or officious host, now felt an overwhelming pity twist inside his comfortably expanded stomach.

By the end of two weeks the invitations to join Laffler at Sbirro's had become something of a ritual. Every day, at a few minutes after five, Costain would step out into the office corridor and lock his cubicle behind him; he would drape his overcoat neatly over his left arm, and peer into the glass of the door to make sure his Homburg was set at the proper angle. At one time he would have followed this by lighting a cigarette, but under Laffler's prodding he had decided to give abstinence a fair trial. Then he would start down the corridor, and Laffler would fall in step at his elbow, clearing his throat. "Ah, Costain. No plans for this evening, I hope."

"No," Costain would say, "I'm footloose and fancy-free," or "At your service," or something equally inane. He wondered at times whether it would not be more tactful to vary the ritual with an occasional refusal, but the glow with which Laffler received his answer, and the rough friendliness of Laffler's grip on his arm, forestalled him.

Among the treacherous crags of the business world, reflected Costain, what better way to secure your footing than friendship with one's employer. Already, a secretary close to the workings of the inner office had commented publicly on Laffler's highly favorable opinion of Costain. That was all to the good.

And the food! The incomparable food at Sbirro's! For the first time in his life, Costain, ordinarily a lean and bony man, noted with gratification that he was certainly gaining weight; within two weeks his bones had disappeared under a layer of sleek, firm flesh, and here and there were even signs of incipient plumpness. It struck Costain one night, while surveying himself in his bath, that the rotund Laffler, himself, might have been a spare and bony man before discovering Sbirro's.

So there was obviously everything to be gained and nothing to be lost by accepting Laffler's invitations. Perhaps after testing the heralded wonders of lamb Amirstan and meeting Sbirro, who thus far had not made an appearance, a refusal or two might be in order. But certainly not until then.

That evening, two weeks to a day

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after his first visit to Sbirro's, Costain had both desires fulfilled: he dined on lamb Amirstan, and he met Sbirro. Both exceeded all his expectations.

When the waiter leaned over their table immediately after seating them and gravely announced: "Tonight is special, sair," Costain was shocked to find his heart pounding with expectation. On the table before him he saw Laffler's hands trembling violently. "But it isn't natural," he thought suddenly: "Two full grown men, presumably intelligent and in the full possession of their senses, as jumpy as a pair of cats waiting to have their meat flung to them!"

"This is it!" Laffler's voice startled him so that he almost leaped from his seat. "The culinary triumph of all times! And faced by it you are embarrassed by the very emotions it distills."

"How did you know that?" Costain asked faintly.

"How? Because a decade ago I underwent your embarrassment. Add to that your air of revulsion and it's easy to see how affronted you are by the knowledge that man has not yet forgotten how to slaver over his meat."

"And these others," whispered Costain, "do they all feel the same thing?"

"Judge for yourself."

Costain looked furtively around at the nearby tables. "You are right," he finally said. "At any rate, there's comfort in numbers."

Laffler inclined his head slightly to the side. "One of the numbers," he remarked, "appears to be in for a disappointment."

Costain followed the gesture. At the table indicated a gray-haired man sat conspicuously alone, and Costain frowned at the empty chair opposite him.

"Why, yes," he recalled, "that very stout, bald man, isn't it? I believe it's the first dinner he's missed here in two weeks."

"The entire decade more likely," said Laffler sympathetically. "Rain or shine, crisis or calamity, I don't think he's missed an evening at Sbirro's since the first time I dined here. Imagine his expression when he's told that on his very first defection, lamb Amirstan was the *plat du jour*."

Costain looked at the empty chair again with a dim discomfort. "His very first?" he murmured.

"Mr. Laffler! And friend! I am so pleased. So very, very pleased. No, do not stand; I will have a place made." Miraculously a seat appeared under the figure standing there at the table. "The lamb Amirstan will be an unqualified success, hurr? I myself have been stewing in the miserable kitchen all the day, prodding the foolish chef to do everything just so. The just so is the important part, hurr? But I see your friend does not know me. An introduction, perhaps?"

The words ran in a smooth, fluid eddy. They rippled, they purred, they hynotized Costain so that he could do no more than stare. The mouth that uncoiled this sinuous

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monologue was alarmingly wide, with thin mobile lips that curled and twisted with every syllable. There was a flat nose with a straggling line of hair under it; wide-set eyes, almost oriental in appearance, that glittered in the unsteady flare of gaslight; and long, sleek hair that swept back from high on the unwrinkled forehead — hair so pale that it might have been bleached of all color. An amazing face surely, and the sight of it tortured Costain with the conviction that it was somehow familiar. His brain twitched and prodded but could not stir up any solid recollection.

Laffler's voice jerked Costain out of his study. "Mr. Sbirro. Mr. Costain, a good friend and associate." Costain rose and shook the proferred hand. It was warm and dry, flint-hard against his palm.

"I am so very pleased, Mr. Costain. So very, very pleased," purred the voice. "You like my little establishment, hurr? You have a great treat in store, I assure you."

Laffler chuckled. "Oh, Costain's been dining here regularly for two weeks," he said. "He's by way of becoming a great admirer of yours, Sbirro."

The eyes were turned on Costain. "A very great compliment. You compliment me with your presence and I return same with my food, hurr? But the lamb Amirstan is far superior to anything of your past experience, I assure you. All the trouble of obtaining it, all the difficulty of preparation, is truly merited."

Costain strove to put aside the exasperating problem of that face. "I have wondered," he said, "why with all these difficulties you mention, you even bother to present lamb Amirstan to the public. Surely your other dishes are excellent enough to uphold your reputation."

Sbirro smiled so broadly that his face became perfectly round. "Perhaps it is a matter of the psychology, hurr? Someone discovers a wonder and must share it with others. He must fill his cup to the brim, perhaps, by observing the so evident pleasure of those who explore it with him. Or," he shrugged, "perhaps it is just a matter of good business."

"Then in the light of all this," Costain persisted, "and considering all the conventions you have imposed on your customers, why do you open the restaurant to the public instead of operating it as a private club?"

The eyes abruptly glinted into Costain's, then turned away. "So perspicacious, hurr? Then I will tell you. Because there is more privacy in a public eating place than in the most exclusive club in existence! Here no one inquires of your affairs; no one desires to know the intimacies of your life. Here the business is eating. We are not curious about names and addresses or the reasons for the coming and going of our guests. We welcome you when you are here; we have no regrets when you are here no longer. That is the answer, hurr?"

Costain was startled by this vehemence. "I had no intention of pry-

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ing," he stammered.

Sbirro ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. "No, no," he reassured, "you are not prying. Do not let me give you that impression. On the contrary, I invite your questions."

"Oh, come, Costain," said Laffler. "Don't let Sbirro intimidate you. I've known him for years and I guarantee that his bark is worse than his bite. Before you know it, he'll be showing you all the privileges of the house — outside of inviting you to visit his precious kitchen, of course."

"Ah," smiled Sbirro, "for that, Mr. Costain may have to wait a little while. For everything else I am at his beck and call."

Laffler slapped his hand jovially on the table. "What did I tell you!" he said. "Now let's have the truth, Sbirro. Has anyone, outside of your staff, ever stepped into the sanctum sanctorum?"

Sbirro looked up. "You see on the wall above you," he said earnestly, "the portrait of one to whom I did the honor. A very dear friend and a patron of most long standing, he is evidence that my kitchen is not inviolate."

Costain studied the picture and started with recognition. "Why," he said excitedly, "that's the famous writer — you know the one, Laffler — he used to do such wonderful short stories and cynical bits and then suddenly took himself off and disappeared in Mexico!"

"Of course!" cried Laffler, "and to think I've been sitting under his portrait for years without even realizing it!" He turned to Sbirro. "A dear friend, you say? His disappearance must have been a blow to you."

Sbirro's face lengthened. "It was, it was, I assure you. But think of it this way, gentlemen: he was probably greater in his death than in his life, hurr? A most tragic man, he often told me that his only happy hours were spent here at this very table. Pathetic, is it not? And to think the only favor I could ever show him was to let him witness the mysteries of my kitchen, which is, when all is said and done, no more than a plain, ordinary kitchen."

"You seem very certain of his death," commented Costain. "After all, no evidence has ever turned up to substantiate it."

Sbirro contemplated the picture. "None at all," he said softly. "Remarkable, hurr?"

With the arrival of the entrée Sbirro leaped to his feet and set about serving them himself. With his eyes alight he lifted the casserole from the tray and sniffed at the fragrance from within with sensual relish. Then, taking great care not to lose a single drop of gravy, he filled two platters with chunks of dripping meat. As if exhausted by this task, he sat back in his chair, breathing heavily. "Gentlemen," he said, "to your good appetite."

Costain chewed his first mouthful with great deliberation and swallowed it. Then he looked at the empty tines of his fork with glazed eyes.

"Good God!" he breathed.

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"It is good, hurr? Better than you imagined?"

Costain shook his head dazedly. "It is as impossible," he said slowly, "for the uninitiated to conceive the delights of lamb Amirstan as for mortal man to look into his own soul."

"Perhaps," Sbirro thrust his head so close that Costain could feel the warm, fetid breath tickle his nostrils, "perhaps you have just had a glimpse into your soul, hurr?"

Costain tried to draw back slightly without giving offense. "Perhaps," he laughed, "and a gratifying picture it made: all fang and claw. But without intending any disrespect, I should hardly like to build my church on *lamb en casserole*."

Sbirro rose and laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "So perspicacious," he said. "Sometimes when you have nothing to do, nothing, perhaps, but sit for a very little while in a dark room and think of this world — what it is and what it is going to be — then you must turn your thoughts a little to the significance of the Lamb in religion. It will be so interesting. And now," he bowed deeply to both men, "I have held you long enough from your dinner. I was most happy," he nodded to Costain, "and I am sure we will meet again." The teeth gleamed, the eyes glittered, and Sbirro was gone down the aisle of tables.

Costain twisted around to stare after the retreating figure. "Have I offended him in some way?" he asked.

Laffler looked up from his plate. "Offended him? He loves that kind of talk. Lamb Amirstan is a ritual with him; get him started and he'll be back at you a dozen times worse than a priest making a conversion."

Costain turned to his meal with the face still hovering before him. "Interesting man," he reflected. "Very."

It took him a month to discover the tantalizing familiarity of that face, and when he did, he laughed aloud in his bed. Why, of course! Sbirro might have sat as the model for the Cheshire cat in *Alice!*

He passed this thought on to Laffler the very next evening as they pushed their way down the street to the restaurant against a chill, blustering wind. Laffler only looked blank.

"You may be right," he said, "but I'm not a fit judge. It's a far cry back to the days when I read the book. A far cry, indeed."

As if taking up his words, a piercing howl came ringing down the street and stopped both men short in their tracks. "Someone's in trouble there," said Laffler. "Look!"

Not far from the entrance to Sbirro's two figures could be seen struggling in the near darkness. They swayed back and forth and suddenly tumbled into a writhing heap on the sidewalk. The piteous howl went up again, and Laffler, despite his girth, ran toward it at a fair speed with Costain tagging cautiously behind.

Stretched out full-length on the pavement was a slender figure with the dusky complexion and white hair

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of one of Sbirro's servitors. His fingers were futilely plucking at the huge hands which encircled his throat, and his knees pushed weakly up at the gigantic bulk of a man who brutally bore down with his full weight.

Laffler came up panting. "Stop this!" he shouted. "What's going on here?"

The pleading eyes almost bulging from their sockets turned toward Laffler. "Help, sair. This man — drunk —"

"Drunk am I, ya dirty —" Costain saw now that the man was a sailor in a badly soiled uniform. The air around him reeked with the stench of liquor. "Pick me pocket and then call me drunk, will ya!" He dug his fingers in harder, and his victim groaned.

Laffler seized the sailor's shoulder. "Let go of him, do you hear! Let go of him at once!" he cried, and the next instant was sent careening into Costain, who staggered back under the force of the blow.

The attack on his own person sent Laffler into immediate and berserk action. Without a sound he leaped at the sailor, striking and kicking furiously at the unprotected face and flanks. Stunned at first, the man came to his feet with a rush and turned on Laffler. For a moment they stood locked together, and then as Costain joined the attack, all three went sprawling to the ground. Slowly Laffler and Costain got to their feet and looked down at the body before them.

"He's either out cold from liquor," said Costain, "or he struck his head going down. In any case, it's a job for the police."

"No, no, sair!" The waiter crawled weakly to his feet, and stood swaying. "No police, sair. Mr. Sbirro do not want such. You understand, sair." He caught hold of Costain with a pleading hand, and Costain looked at Laffler.

"Of course not," said Laffler. "We won't have to bother with the police. They'll pick him up soon enough, the murderous sot. But what in the world started all this?"

"That man, sair. He make most erratic way while walking, and with no meaning I push against him. Then he attack me, accusing me to rob him."

"As I thought." Laffler pushed the waiter gently along. "Now go on in and get yourself attended to."

The man seemed ready to burst into tears. "To you, sair, I owe my life. If there is anything I can do —"

Laffler turned into the areaway that led to Sbirro's door. "No, no, it was nothing. You go along, and if Sbirro has any questions send him to me. I'll straighten it out."

"My life, sair," were the last words they heard as the inner door closed behind them.

"There you are, Costain," said Laffler, as a few minutes later he drew his chair under the table, "civilized man in all his glory. Reeking with alcohol, strangling to death some miserable innocent who came too close."

Costain made an effort to gloss over the nerve-shattering memory of the

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episode. "It's the neurotic cat that takes to alcohol," he said. "Surely there's a reason for that sailor's condition."

"Reason? Of course there is. Plain atavistic savagery!" Laffler swept his arm in an all-embracing gesture. "Why do we all sit here at our meat? Not only to appease physical demands, but because our atavistic selves cry for release. Think back, Costain. Do you remember that I once described Sbirro as the epitome of civilization? Can you now see why? A brilliant man, he fully understands the nature of human beings. But unlike lesser men he bends all his efforts to the satisfaction of our innate natures without resultant harm to some innocent bystander."

"When I think back on the wonders of lamb Amirstan," said Costain, "I quite understand what you're driving at. And, by the way, isn't it nearly due to appear on the bill of fare? It must have been over a month ago that it was last served."

The waiter, filling the tumblers, hesitated. "I am so sorry, sair. No special this evening."

"There's your answer," Laffler grunted, "and probably just my luck to miss out on it altogether the next time."

Costain stared at him. "Oh, come, that's impossible."

"No, blast it." Laffler drank off half his water at a gulp and the waiter immediately refilled the glass. "I'm off to South America for a surprise tour of inspection. One month, two months, Lord knows how long."

"Are things that bad down there?"

"They could be better." Laffler suddenly grinned. "Mustn't forget it takes very mundane dollars and cents to pay the tariff at Sbirro's."

"I haven't heard a word of this around the office."

"Wouldn't be a surprise tour if you had. Nobody knows about this except myself — and now you. I want to walk in on them completely unsuspected. Find out what flimflammery they're up to down there. As far as the office is concerned, I'm off on a jaunt somewhere. Maybe recuperating in some sanatorium from my hard work. Anyhow, the business will be in good hands. Yours, among them."

"Mine?" said Costain, surprised.

"When you go in tomorrow you'll find yourself in receipt of a promotion, even if I'm not there to hand it to you personally. Mind you, it has nothing to do with our friendship either; you've done fine work, and I'm immensely grateful for it."

Costain reddened under the praise. "You don't expect to be in tomorrow. Then you're leaving tonight?"

Laffler nodded. "I've been trying to wangle some reservations. If they come through, well, this will be in the nature of a farewell celebration."

"You know," said Costain slowly, "I devoutly hope that your reservations don't come through. I believe our dinners here have come to mean more to me than I ever dared imagine."

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The waiter's voice broke in. "Do you wish to be served now, sair?"—and they both started.

"Of course, of course," said Laffler sharply, "I didn't realize you were waiting."

"What bothers me," he told Costain as the waiter turned away, "is the thought of the lamb Amirstan I'm bound to miss. To tell you the truth, I've already put off my departure a week, hoping to hit a lucky night, and now I simply can't delay any more. I do hope that when you're sitting over your share of lamb Amirstan, you'll think of me with suitable regrets."

Costain laughed. "I will indeed," he said as he turned to his dinner.

Hardly had he cleared the plate when a waiter silently reached for it. It was not their usual waiter, he observed; it was none other than the victim of the assault.

"Well," Costain said, "how do you feel now? Still under the weather?"

The waiter paid no attention to him. Instead, with the air of a man under great strain, he turned to Laffler. "Sair," he whispered. "My life. I owe it to you. I can repay you!"

Laffler looked up in amazement, then shook his head firmly. "No," he said; "I want nothing from you, understand? You have repaid me sufficiently with your thanks. Now get on with your work and let's hear no more about it."

The waiter did not stir an inch, but his voice rose slightly. "By the body and blood of your God, sair, I will help you even if you do not want! *Do not go into the kitchen, sair.* I trade you my life for yours, sair, when I speak this. Tonight or any night of your life, do not go into the kitchen at Sbirro's!"

Laffler sat back, completely dumfounded. "Not go into the kitchen? Why shouldn't I go into the kitchen if Mr. Sbirro ever took it into his head to invite me there? What's all this about?"

A hard hand was laid on Costain's back, and another gripped the waiter's arm. The waiter remained frozen to the spot, his lips compressed, his eyes downcast.

"What is all *what* about, gentlemen?" purred the voice. "So opportune an arrival. In time as ever, I see, to answer all the questions, hurr?"

Laffler breathed a sigh of relief. "Ah, Sbirro, thank heaven you're here. This man is saying something about my not going into your kitchen. Do you know what he means?"

The teeth showed in a broad grin. "But of course. This good man was giving you advice in all amiability. It so happens that my too emotional chef heard some rumor that I might have a guest into his precious kitchen, and he flew into a fearful rage. Such a rage, gentlemen! He even threatened to give notice on the spot, and you can understand what that would mean to Sbirro's, hurr? Fortunately, I succeeded in showing him what a signal honor it is to have an esteemed patron and true connoisseur observe him at his work first hand, and now he is quite amenable. Quite, hurr?"

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He released the waiter's arm. "You are at the wrong table," he said softly. "See that it does not happen again."

The waiter slipped off without daring to raise his eyes and Sbirro drew a chair to the table. He seated himself and brushed his hand lightly over his hair. "Now I am afraid that the cat is out of the bag, hurr? This invitation to you, Mr. Laffler, was to be a surprise; but the surprise is gone, and all that is left is the invitation."

Laffler mopped beads of perspiration from his forehead. "Are you serious?" he said huskily. "Do you mean that we are really to witness the preparation of your food tonight?"

Sbirro drew a sharp fingernail along the tablecloth, leaving a thin, straight line printed in the linen. "Ah," he said, "I am faced with a dilemma of great proportions." He studied the line soberly. "You, Mr. Laffler, have been my guest for ten long years. But our friend here —"

Costain raised his hand in protest. "I understand perfectly. This invitation is solely to Mr. Laffler, and naturally my presence is embarrassing. As it happens, I have an early engagement for this evening and must be on my way anyhow. So you see there's no dilemma at all, really."

"No," said Laffler, "absolutely not. That wouldn't be fair at all. We've been sharing this until now, Costain, and I won't enjoy this experience half as much if you're not along. Surely Sbirro can make his conditions flexible, this one occasion."

They both looked at Sbirro who shrugged his shoulders regretfully.

Costain rose abruptly. "I'm not going to sit here, Laffler, and spoil your great adventure. And then too," he bantered, "think of that ferocious chef waiting to get his cleaver on you. I prefer not to be at the scene. I'll just say goodbye," he went on, to cover Laffler's guilty silence, "and leave you to Sbirro. I'm sure he'll take pains to give you a good show." He held out his hand and Laffler squeezed it painfully hard.

"You're being very decent, Costain," he said. "I hope you'll continue to dine here until we meet again. It shouldn't be too long."

Sbirro made way for Costain to pass. "I will expect you," he said. "*Au 'voir.*"

Costain stopped briefly in the dim foyer to adjust his scarf and fix his Homburg at the proper angle. When he turned away from the mirror, satisfied at last, he saw with a final glance that Laffler and Sbirro were already at the kitchen door; Sbirro holding the door invitingly wide with one hand, while the other rested, almost tenderly, on Laffler's meaty shoulders.

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THE "BABY" CIPHER

by W. A. DARLINGTON

ROGER MASON, rugger international and classical lecturer of St. Enoch's College, Cambridge, frowned heavily as he heard a knock at his door.

"Come in, and keep quiet," he called out with a sort of genial annoyance. "I'm finishing something."

Somebody entered behind him, and stood waiting.

"You're rather out of training, whoever you are," said Roger after a few moments, putting down his pen. "Who is it?"

"It's me. Sheila."

Roger fairly leaped from his chair. Instead of being a young man in a gown, as he had assumed, his visitor was a girl in a yellow frock. At the moment she was a little disheveled and very much out of breath, but he could see that she was more than ordinarily pretty. And what was surprising considering her confident use of her Christian name, he did not know her from Eve.

"Sheila?" he repeated. And then he remembered a small schoolgirl with whom he had often gone prawning in Sussex on a summer holiday some years before. Her father was a country lawyer somewhere in Suffolk, whose hobby was cryptography. "Why, it's Sheila Blaker."

"Yes."

"What a difference a few years can make! No wonder I didn't know you." He stared at her; and he noticed that her face was a little drawn and anxious.

"Listen, Roger," she said. "I had to come to you. Father's in some awful kind of trouble, and I don't know what it is, except that he seems to have lost a lot of money. And now he's turned me out of the house and told me I must hide myself somewhere. . . ."

"*Hide* yourself?"

"Yes. So I asked myself to stay here with the Babcocks, so that I could come to you for help."

"But what can *I* do?"

"Tell me what these mean."

She opened her handbag and took out some slips of paper, covered with a jumble of letters.

"Cipher messages?" said Roger.

"Yes."

"Go on."

"I went into Father's study yesterday to get a book, and found him staring at one of those messages and looking like death. I didn't show I'd noticed anything — he's been very queer lately, and I've got used to hiding my feelings — and I heard him lock something in his drawer. Then he told me he wanted me to go away from home that night in the car, and lie low. He wouldn't tell me why, so I

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refused to go. The poor old thing was so agitated that it frightened me, so in the middle of the night I—I borrowed his keys and burgled his desk.

"There were these three messages in cipher. So I thought of you, and how bright you're supposed to be at things like that, and how Daddy used to make up ciphers for you to solve at the seaside that time. I took copies of the messages, and in the morning I told Daddy I'd go away if he liked, and he nearly cried with relief. So here I am. And can you *possibly* find out what's all about?"

Roger frowned over the messages.

"I'll have a try," he said. "I wonder why they're all signed 'Baby'?"

"Do you think some awful woman is blackmailing him?"

"It looks like it. Let me see what I can make of these messages. Can you spare half an hour while I analyze 'em?"

"All day, if it helps. Could I get some tea ready while you're working?"

"Yes. Good idea. The things are in the next room."

In the next room Sheila found, besides the tea things, a large variety of photographs. Most of them showed groups of young men, in very clean football clothes and looking very camera-conscious, with Roger generally at or near the post of honor in the middle. But there was one superb battle-piece showing Roger, covered with mud, forcing his way over the goal-line at Twickenham with three Oxford men hanging on to him.

"Goodness," said Sheila to herself, glancing through the open door at the absorbed student bowed over his desk. "I never knew he was as strong as *that!* It doesn't seem fair that a man should have all those muscles and a brain as well."

After a thoughtful tour of the picture-gallery she set about tea-making. At the end of the half-hour she came to Roger's desk.

"Ready," she announced, looking over his shoulder at what looked like abstruse calculations in algebra. "Have you got anything?"

He laughed, and threw down his pencil.

"Not much. Do you know anything about cipher solving?"

"No. Only that you look for the commonest letter and call it E. Or don't you?"

"Yes, you do. But only in the simplest kind of cipher. People don't use that kind much—except for racing tips in the agony columns. No, what you really look for is any kind of repetitions and similarities."

"And have you found any?"

"Similarities, yes. Repetitions, no. Look here—Message One."

He spread it out for her to read. It was:

AEQAUTEFMIBDQXTJFEIKFM
UOQGBHFTIQXFEGLIQOCFGE
LTQDEIOFMITKQAEYFINFHQ
EIWQEJAFXIEQUTFTATHFMQ
AOUIFEFGDAQEUFIXEQAJYO
QZNOQTNTFAQUIE BABY

"The common letters there," he said, "are A,E,F,I,O,Q,T, and U.

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Now look at Message Two."

He put it beside the first. It read:

OHEYFHNKQJDCFSORFASQE
YROQVFOQESIFRIDBQSTRFY
ERFAMUQLOUQUSFAITQRKIF
EAUIQWFYFENO BABY

"The commonest letters in this one," Roger said, "are E,F,I,O,Q, R,S and Y. Also, there's a certain amount of A and U. That means that in both messages you get A,E,F,I, O,Q, and U preponderating. That's a striking similarity, and it seems to show that our friend Baby is using a substituted alphabet. But I don't believe she is."

"Why not?"

"Because a substituted alphabet would behave itself according to the laws of frequency. This one doesn't. In Message One there are lots of T's, and hardly any in Message Two. And in Message One there isn't an R or an S, while they are common in Message Two, which is much shorter. And that's borne out by Message Three." He spread it out beside the other two. It read:

URSFAAOYQYFJOFPQOUYAQA
FPPOQOUFAPAQEXIYFPRYQJ
VSQIFOUYFAPQACRFOGQPYJ
KQEAUFIYEAQAFOPRFAOQIP
UAFERYOFXEIYQUFAESIFXZ
CQEJOEFAZYIQPBPQIJKFUQ
MOO BABY

"Baby's a bit more talkative here," he said. "But the thing that strikes me is that while there isn't a single P in the other messages, this one's all over P's. Otherwise, the common letters are A,E,F,I,O,Q,U and Y. All our old friends, in fact. It's all very unusual. If this was plain substitution, there ought to be small groups of letters repeating themselves. But there aren't. I've never seen a substitution cipher so free from repeats."

"Oh, dear. What's the next step?"

"The next step," said Roger, getting up from his desk, "is to have tea. Then you go back to the Babcocks', and I'll wrestle with Baby in earnest. I'll ring you up when I get anything. . . . Two lumps, please, and milk in last, if you don't mind."

When she had gone, he went back to work; but for a time he could not concentrate. His mind kept sheering away from the jumble of letters and reflecting on the strange power possessed by gawky schoolgirls of turning themselves suddenly into beautiful young women. Could she be in real danger? he wondered. There was no doubt her father thought so. He turned with renewed determination to the ciphers, and gradually Sheila gave place to Baby in his thoughts.

Baby, however, proved oddly elusive. Roger chased first one theory and then another till his eyes swam, but with no success. Baby seemed to have achieved the cipher-maker's dream, of eliminating all significant repetitions.

At last, after two hours of abortive work, he decided to take a brisk walk to the tobacconist's and back, and after that to begin again.

"Now," he said to himself, as he got back to his desk, "let's take stock.

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It's quite certain that all three messages are done on the same system. It's not ordinary substitution, because there are no consistently uncommon letters, and only very few repeated groups of letters — which are probably accidental. Anyhow, if they aren't accidental I can't make sense of them, so let's ignore them."

He studied his analysis of the three messages thoughtfully, and then took a combined count of the letters. He found that F occurred 45 times, Q 43, A and E 28 each, O 25, I 24, U 17, and Y 16 times. No other letter occurred more than a dozen times.

He gazed at his paper, frowning.

"First, two consonants," he thought. "Then all the vowels. Then Y, which might be a consonant or a vowel. That must mean something, if I could only see what. Why should these seven or eight letters be so evenly distributed over the messages, and the rest so spasmodic? And why should F and Q be the only common consonants?"

Suddenly he drew a sharp breath.

"Good lord," he said softly. "Good lord, I must have been blind. I believe I've got something."

It was a good three hours later, however, before he rang Sheila up.

"I've solved it," he said simply.*

"Oh, Roger, you are clever! What's it all about?"

"Well, either it's all some kind of practical joke, or Baby is a very unpleasant lady indeed. We must take no chances. Listen. I want you to come round here about 10:30 tomorrow morning, and to see if you think you're being followed."

"Followed?"

"Yes. Shadowed, you know."

"But how beastly! Do you think I shall be?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. Anyhow, if you are, don't let it be seen that you've any suspicion. Come straight here, walking briskly, and hit up the pace when you get near the College. And wear that yellow dress you had on today."

"Why?"

"So that I can describe you to the Head Porter. If anybody tries to follow you in, he'll head him off."

"Or her."

"Oh, I don't think Baby will do her dirty work in person. Anyhow, it's important that whoever it is shouldn't know whose rooms you come to. Is that clear?"

"Yes. . . . Roger, is it all right? I mean, nothing awful's going to happen, is it?"

"Nothing whatever," he said cheerfully. But his expression was less confident than his words.

Punctually at 10:30 next day Sheila burst into Roger's room.

"There *was* somebody," she said. "A horrible man in a brown hat."

"Ah, then that settles it," said Roger calmly. "Baby *is* starting something. Well, we're going to do her

* Since all the evidence on which Roger's solution was based has already been given, perhaps amateur cryptographers may now like to try their hands at solving the cipher. Roger's own reasoning is explained at the end of the story.

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down. And this is Colin Bellamy, who's going to help us."

He indicated a slim, small light-haired undergraduate who had been staring admiringly in Sheila's direction ever since she came in.

"But what's it all about?" she asked. "Roger, I must know. All this mystery is scaring me stiff."

"There's no mystery, now. Baby is blackmailing your father. I think he must have been refusing to pay up, because she's threatening to put the screw on him by kidnaping you."

"But who is Baby?"

"That we shall find out later. The first thing is to get you away. You've heard of Margaret Abbott, the actress?"

"Of course."

"Well, Colin is her son, and what he doesn't know about make-up hasn't been discovered. If you'll go along with him, he'll disguise you so that you won't know yourself. But first, I want you to ring up your father and tell him you'd like to come home today. I want to know what he says."

She went to the telephone in the next room, but in five minutes returned looking unhappy.

"He won't hear of it," she said. "I've never heard him so fierce about anything. He made me promise not to be seen there on any account."

Roger nodded.

"I thought he would. That means Baby will be visiting him today. I think I shall have to be there, too . . . Colin, take her along and fix her up. I'll be outside the Pitt Club in Jesus Lane at 11:15."

"Right. Come along, Miss Blaker. I'm just across the court."

On the way down the stairs Sheila stopped.

"But look here," she said, "we can't cross the court. That horrible man would see us."

Colin grinned amiably.

"Roger Mason's thought all that out," he said. "We're going through the kitchens, and round by the hall and the Combination Room. I've got Mason's keys."

Sheila followed her guide through a maze of passages to a room with his name painted over the door.

"Now look," he said. "I've got some clothes of my mother's that I borrowed to play a widow in a College show. If I get you up as a woman of fifty-five or so, do you think you could keep up the character from here to the gate?"

"Oh, dear, I'm no actress at all. . . . Still, if I were sure I looked the part I think I could."

"I'll guarantee the disguise. The things are on my bed in the next room. Put them on, and I'll do your face in here when you're ready. There's a suitcase on the floor. Pack your own things in it."

She went into the next room. A moment later her head reappeared.

"Stays too?" she asked.

"Certainly, stays. And pull 'em as tight as you can. You want to have a nice stiff Edwardian figure."

Ten minutes later she came back.

"Lord, don't you look odd," said

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Colin. "Like a little girl dressed up in Granny's clothes. They're a nice fit, though. Shoes all right?"

Sheila put out a foot in a staid black stocking and a steel-buckled shoe.

"Quite good, only the heels are higher than I like."

"All to the good. They'll help stiffen your walk. Come on, and I'll match you up with your clothes."

From a box he produced a wig of white hair, which he pulled over Sheila's head. He made some careful adjustments, and nodded.

"That'll do," he said. "Now for the real job."

He went to work on her complexion, slowly and with great concentration.

"Sorry to be so pernickety," he said, busy touching in minute detail under her eyes. "But this has got to pass muster in the open. . . . There, now you look really fiftyish. Have a look at yourself."

He led her into the next room, where there was a full-length mirror.

"Good heavens!" said Sheila.

A distinguished-looking lady was gazing back at her out of the glass — a gallant and upright old lady, who bore her years well, but was growing a little tired and haggard in the battle of life.

"My aunt, Mrs. Benton-Smythe," said Colin. Sheila bowed, and received a stately acknowledgment from the figure in the glass.

"Hat, cloak, gloves." Colin produced these things as he spoke. "Get them on, Auntie, and we'll be off. . . . Nervous?"

"Quaking."

"That'll be all to the good, too — it'll look like the shakiness of age. Keep your knees and ankles a little stiff, and talk in a quiet, tired voice and you might be anybody's aunt. So come on — nobody'll look at you."

Her knees knocked together and her heart thumped so that it hurt; but hardly a soul took any notice of the undergraduate who solicitously conducted an elderly female relative across the court and past the lodge to a car at the curb. One of the porters came forward and helped the lady in, but Brown-hat's eyes never wavered from his watch for the girl in the yellow frock.

"A neat getaway," Colin commented. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Brown-hat's suspicions had still not been aroused, swung the car into Sidney Street, turned into Jesus Lane, and drew up opposite the Pitt Club.

Roger was standing just inside the entrance. He took the wheel as Colin got out.

"Well, goodbye, Aunt Benton-Smythe," said Colin. "Don't disgrace your white hairs, and send them back to me by parcel post when you've done with them."

Roger let in the clutch.

For some time he dodged in and out of side streets, and Sheila guessed that he was still evading possible pursuers. Then he emerged on to a main road, and drove along it for five miles

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at the utmost speed of which the car was capable. Then he turned on to a small by-road, pulled into the side and stopped.

"That ought to baffle Baby," he said. Then for the first time he had a good look at Sheila, and laughed.

"My word, what a masterpiece. *What* was it Colin called you?"

"Aunt Benton-Smythe."

"It suits you. An aunt anybody might be proud of. . . . Look here, I'm going to dump you with some friends of mine at Ely while I interview Baby. We'd better find somewhere where you can change your things, though it seems a pity to lose Aunt Benton-Smythe so soon."

She gave a cry of consternation.

"Roger, we've left my clothes behind! Colin was in such a hurry and I was in such a state of nerves that we forgot the suitcase."

"Oh!" Roger thought for a second, and then gave a grin. "Oh, well," he remarked, "I didn't tell my friends whether you were a young lady or an old one, so it's all the same."

"It isn't. I'm not going to be dumped among a lot of strangers as Mrs. Benton-Smythe. I couldn't keep it up. I'm coming to help you tackle Baby."

"But it's you she's after."

"Yes — *me*. Not Mrs. Benton-Smythe."

"But if you can't keep it up . . ."

"I can if you're there, Roger. Anyhow, I'm coming."

She set her jaw obstinately, and Roger suddenly laughed.

"All right, Auntie, you win," he said. "You've no idea what an imperious old thing you look. You can come, and you can help. But if there's any danger of rough stuff, you must do exactly as I tell you. Promise?"

"All right, I promise."

"Good. Well, now we've a lot of time to waste, as we aren't going to Ely. We'd better find a nice dull hotel where I can stand Mrs. B.-S. a lunch."

They drifted idly along the road, rejecting several inviting-looking inns as being too adventurous for an aunt, and finally found what they sought in a converted country house on the edge of a large village.

An aged waiter showed them into a dining-room whose sole inhabitant was an old lady at a corner table.

"Just the place for a couple of conspirators to hatch their plots," said Roger, as a plate of thin tomato soup inaugurated their meal. "Tell me, how many servants does your father keep? And how often do they go to the pictures?"

"Only two now. And whenever they can."

"And what time does the local cinema open?"

"Five. What extraordinary questions you ask."

"Not a bit. I don't know how long it'll be before Brown-hat realizes you've given him the slip, but as soon as he does report, Baby will want to have a short sharp talk with your father, alone. She'll ring him up and order him to get rid of the servants, and the only way of making certain

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of that is to send them to the pictures."

"Yes, I should think that's what he'd do."

"So you see, we must keep an eye on your house from 4:30 onwards. Is there anywhere that'll do as an observation post?"

Sheila reflected, while the waiter placed some stolid-looking mutton before them.

"There's the old summer house," she said when he had gone. "It's full of croquet hoops and beetles."

"All summer houses are. What's a few beetles in a good cause? Can we get into it without being seen?"

"Yes. We can park the car in the lane and come down through the back drive. Nobody uses it, now that we can't afford a gardener."

"Good lord, Baby *must* have been bleeding the poor old man. Well, all the more reason for somebody to be on the spot when she visits him next."

"Ugh!" said Sheila, three hours later, looking with distaste at the summer house floor. "I was right when I said beetles."

"And you were right when you said croquet hoops," said Roger, with feeling, because he was sitting miserably on a pile of them. They had been there nearly an hour, and he felt cramped. It occurred to him that if he had guessed wrong about Baby, they'd have to sit there till dark.

"Do you think Baby will come herself?" Sheila asked him.

"No. It's no job for a delicate female. I think she'll send a boy friend. By the way, can you think of anybody she's likely to have got in with? Any enemy of your father's? . . . His name might begin with a C, but I'm not sure about that."

She shook her head.

"No. Nobody. . . . Unless you mean Mr. Clitheroe."

"Who's he?"

"He used to be Daddy's managing clerk. I used to hate him when I was a child. But he retired years ago."

Roger nodded, with an air of satisfaction.

"I'll take a small bet that Clitheroe's our man."

"Why? Is there something about him in the cipher?"

"Not exactly. I've deduced him."

"By the way, you haven't shown me those messages since you worked them out. Can I see them now?"

"Of course."

He was feeling for his pocketbook, when Sheila squeezed his arm.

"Look. There go the maids. At last we'll get away from the beetles."

"At last we'll get some action. . . . Blast it, they're locking the back door!"

"Yes, but the key goes under a loose brick. . . . There they go. Come on."

Two minutes later they were inside the house, safely hidden in a screened alcove whose window gave on the front drive. Roger curled up on one end of the wide window-seat while Sheila, after an attempt to do the same which was thwarted by her

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Edwardian figure, perched primly at the other end.

Ten minutes later still there was the sound of a car coming up the drive. Roger crouched below the line of the window.

"See who it is," he said in a low voice, "but don't be seen on any account."

The car stopped. Sheila watched tensely.

"It *is* him," she whispered. "Clitheroe."

"Ah. Now we know where we are!"

"I don't."

"Tell you later. Sh!"

A bell rang. A moment later they caught a glimpse of Mr. Blaker, looking bent and old, crossing the hall towards the lobby and the front door.

"Now!" said Sheila, and quickly and quietly she led the way. By the time the front door had been opened, they were in the study, and were hidden, one behind each of the heavy curtains which hung, drawn back, on either side of the big bow-window. They could see one another, but from the room they were invisible.

Mr. Clitheroe was a fat, unpleasing man with an air of ineffable self-satisfaction. He came into the room as if he owned it.

"Well, Blaker," he said, "so you're trying tricks, are you? That girl of yours has given me the slip somehow."

"Thank heaven!" said Mr. Blaker.

"You needn't. It'll do you no good." He gave a nasty laugh. "Trying to kick, are you? Very well, you've paid up nicely so far, but I'm getting tired of collecting. So I'll have the rest in a lump sum, here and now, or a certain document goes by tonight's post."

Mr. Blaker raised his head.

"I should like to kill you," he said simply.

"I know, but you haven't the guts. Besides, you've only yourself to thank. A lazy lawyer who signs what his clerk gives him without reading it deserves what he gets. And what he gets is hell, if the clerk's as clever as I am. Come on, get the money. I know it's in the safe."

"And suppose I tell you to send off the paper, and be damned to you?"

"You daren't. The case against you is so good your own daughter'd think you were a thief. Come on now, here it is." He threw a document on the table. Mr. Blaker's eye glittered and he made a half-step forward; but the other's hand appeared from his pocket.

"None of that," he said, "or this gun'll go off. Now hurry, or I'll take the paper and the money too. And I'll fake you a suicide if necessary. I've had the house watched and I know you're alone."

Roger stepped from behind the curtain.

"That's just where you're wrong," he said. With one hand he twitched the gun from the gaping Clitheroe's grasp; with the other he gave him a push in the chest which sent him sprawling into a corner.

"We call that a hand-off in Rugby football," he explained pleasantly. He pocketed the gun, and handed the

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document on the table to Mr. Blaker, who was standing dazed by the speed of events.

"Make sure it is the right paper and then burn it," he said. But there was no sort of doubt that it was the right paper, for Mr. Clitheroe scrambled to his feet, with a bellow of rage, and snatched at it, only to find himself back in his corner with all the breath knocked out of him.

"Another hand-off," said Roger, "and if you come out again before I give you leave, I'll show you a nice place-kick."

Mr. Clitheroe stayed where he was, and was silent, except for a sort of strangled choke when Mr. Blaker, coming to slightly, tore the paper and threw the pieces into the fire.

As they turned to black ash, Mr. Blaker seemed to fill out and grow ten years younger.

"I shall never be able to repay you, Roger," he said. "But I don't understand how you're here."

"Sheila found some cipher messages in your desk and brought them to me. I solved them, and Mrs. Benton-Smythe and I came to the rescue."

"Mrs. Benton-Smythe?"

"She's behind that curtain. Come out, Auntie."

She came out.

"I am deeply grateful to you, madam," said Mr. Blaker courteously. Mrs. Benton-Smythe, who seemed to be suppressing some strong emotion, answered him in a faint voice, but he paid her no further attention than politeness to a stranger demanded. His mind was engaged on something else.

"So you solved the cipher?" he said, with a note of disappointment in his voice.

"Yes — luckily for you," retorted Roger.

"Oh, yes, indeed. . . . But I had hoped it was a better cipher than that."

"Why, was it one of yours?"

"Yes. My most ingenious one — or so I thought."

Roger glanced at Mr. Clitheroe who, having dusted his clothes, was now standing in the corner like a sulky schoolboy.

"How did he come to know of it?"

"I showed it to him once, in my office."

"Nice for him. It just suited his purpose."

"Yes. But of course I didn't know then what a scoundrel he was."

"I should have thought that stuck out a mile."

Mr. Clitheroe glowered. He seemed unused to criticism.

"If you've quite finished with me, I'll be going," he said. Roger shook his head.

"But I haven't. You forget I was behind that curtain just now."

The fat man licked his lips uneasily. He had felt big and brave when he had been threatening a frail old man with his pistol, but he felt small and timid now.

"Oh, well," he muttered, "perhaps I was too rough. I'll apologize, if you like."

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"You will. You will also write a full description of your plot against Mr. Blaker, and a check for the money you've got from him."

There was a dead silence, during which Mr. Clitheroe's already pasty complexion slowly went pale yellow.

"I'll do no such thing," he said.

"Mr. Blaker" — Roger's tone was even — "will you please take Mrs. Benton-Smythe into another room? I want a little private talk with this man."

But before anybody had moved, Mr. Clitheroe sprang to the telephone. He was gibbering with anger and fright.

"You touch me, and I'll call the police."

"All right. That'll do equally well. With Mrs. Benton-Smythe and me as independent witnesses, it ought to get you a nice long stretch."

Mr. Clitheroe looked round at the three stern faces, and capitulated. He sat down at the desk and took a sheet of paper.

"And while the boy is doing his home-work," said Roger, "I'll show you how the cipher came out."

He felt in his pocketbook, and produced a small bundle of papers.

"I was completely flummoxed at first," he said, "because the first two messages gave me nothing. The frequency of the letters was all anyhow, and there weren't any repetitions. But the third message showed that, however peculiarly the rest of the alphabet might be behaving, F and Q kept on turning up all through. So I underlined all the F's and Q's, and found that they cropped up so regularly that it looked as if they were dummies, used to separate words from each other. So I wrote out the first message without any F's or Q's, and it looked like this."

He took a paper from the bundle and spread it out. It read:

AE AUTE MIBD XTJ EIK MUO
GBH TI X EGLI OC GELT DEIO
MITK AEY IN H EIW EJA XIE
UT TATH M AOUIE GDA EU
IXE AJYO ZNO TNT A UIE
BABY

"You see," he said, "it breaks itself up into little groups which simply can't be words because there are never more than four letters to a group. All the other messages broke themselves up in the same way, so I knew I must be on the track of something. I puzzled at it for hours trying to make the groups mean something — but there was nothing to get hold of. Then it occurred to me, quite idly, that a system which worked in groups of one, two, three, or four symbols was rather like the Morse Code. And suddenly the whole explanation flashed on me."

"And what was it?" asked Sheila.

"Baby *was* using the Morse Code — the dear old Morse Code and nothing else, with consonants for dashes and vowels for dots. And the groups didn't stand for words at all, they stood for *letters*."

He turned to Mr. Blaker. "It's a beautiful piece of puzzle-making," he said. "I was almost sorry when it

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came out."

He produced a piece of paper and handed it to Sheila. "Message One translated," he said, and she saw that it looked like this:

I F ' Y O U D O N T
.. ..-. .-.. --- ..- -.. --- -. -
P A Y B Y S A T
.--. .- -.-- -... -.-- ... .- -
U R D A Y T H E
..- .-. -.. .- -.-- - .... .
G I R L G O E S
--. .. .-. .-.. --. --- . ...

" 'If you don't pay by Saturday the girl goes.' " Sheila read out, and shivered. "What do the others mean?"

" 'Look after your daughter' is the second, and the third is 'When the girl goes away she will be followed.' "

"It sounds like something out of a gangster film."

"Yes, but it's turned out to be one of the 'Crime Doesn't Pay' series," said Roger grimly. He turned to the scribe at the table. "Finished? Sign, please."

Mr. Clitheroe signed and pushed the paper across. Roger handed it to Mr. Blaker.

"Just see he's got it all in, and witness it. Meanwhile he's got a check to write. How much has he had from you?"

"Nearly £4,000."

"Oh, well, we won't niggle. Make it four thousand."

Mr. Clitheroe seemed about to speak, but caught Roger's eye and desisted. He wrote out the check with a trembling hand. Roger picked it up.

"If this check is not honored on Monday," he said, "your confession will go to the police, *and* I shall pay you a personal call with my football boots on. If it is honored, you'll hear no more of the business, but the confession will go to Mr. Blaker's bank, just to be on the safe side." He turned to Mr. Blaker. "Confession all in order, I hope?"

"Yes. It's all there."

"Good. I'll witness it. . . . And now you, Mrs. Benton-Smythe."

"What do I put?"

"Your ordinary signature."

She signed, smiling.

Mr. Blaker, looking over her shoulder, gasped.

"Good heavens — *Sheila!*"

"*What?*"

Mr. Clitheroe sprang to his feet, glaring. Unkindly as he had taken to being coerced by a large man, he had borne it with some show of self-control; but to have been made a fool of by a girl was obviously a body-blow to his vanity. For one moment he seemed to be going to burst into a flood either of curses or of tears. Then he turned, and fairly ran from the room.

Mr. Blaker seized Sheila round the waist and executed a triumphant *pas de deux* with her.

"You must stay to dinner and celebrate, Roger," he said. "I can never begin to thank you for what you've done, but at least we can drink your health in some tolerable champagne. I'll go and get it out."

He went off. Sheila caught sight of herself in a mirror. Her wig had

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slipped in the dance.

"Heavens," she said. "I look like a drunk duchess! I must go change."

"Yes, do," said Roger. "It's time I saw Sheila again."

"Do you want to?"

"I do, very much."

"She won't be long."

She went up the stairs. Something in Roger's look had set her blood running in sudden excitement. Should she wear the white, which was more suitable to a domestic occasion, or the green which was more devastating? Perhaps it had better be the white. . . . Across these thoughts came another, bringing her up short.

"Roger!"

"What's the matter?"

"That woman! We've forgotten all about her!"

"What woman?" He looked completely bewildered.

"Baby."

"Oh, her." He laughed. "Baby was Mr. Clitheroe in person. You see, in the cipher, B-A-B-Y stands for dash-dot-dash-dot — the letter C. I told you I was looking for somebody with that initial."

She smiled down at him.

"You *are* clever, aren't you!" she said.

He looked a very satisfactory figure of a man, standing at the foot of the stair and gazing up at her with such warmth in his eyes. On a sudden impulse she kissed her hand to him, and sped along the corridor to her bedroom.

Her mind was made up. It should be the green.

NEXT MONTH . . .

EQMM will contain: A Second Prize Winner;

FROM ANOTHER WORLD by *Clayton Rawson*
(the first short story about the Great Merlini)

and the Special Prize Winner for the best story by a college student;

THE SILVER DOLLAR by *Rink Creussen* (Princeton)

also

THE LETTERS IN EVIDENCE by *C. S. Forester*
DRY-KYE by *Ben Ames Williams*
THE PHANTOM ARCHER by *John Dickson Carr*
THE WEAPON THAT DIDN'T EXIST by *Rufus King*

and other top-drawer stories

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At one time Donn Byrne was a famous writer, especially after the publication of his book, MESSER MARCO POLO. *But today the fame of Donn Byrne is only a belletristic memory, no more. And yet the wild, extravagant Irish-American, who once ran away to South America to become a cowboy poet, who was fired from a newspaper because of his "bad English," who won enough money in a single night's gambling at Cannes to buy a castle in County Cork — that strange, excitable litterateur was credited with an exquisite ear for language and with having been one of the truest romantics in America's literary renaissance.*

No, you would not expect Donn Byrne to have written detective-crime stories, although he had a poet's sensitivity to the smell of evil and the sound of violence. Yet here is a crime short story whose mood is the very essence of Donn Byrne's talent — a mood that will remind you of the curious exoticism which Thomas Burke discovered in London's Limehouse. This is the tale of a Manchu prince who became an American merchant, and although the scene of the story is a shop on Fifth Avenue, the atmosphere is shot through with emeralds and lacquer, with peachblow and cloisonné; for the smiling Li Sin was not only a merchant who had unearthed the treasures of the Old World to sell, at a just profit, to the New World, he was also a physician of rare and godlike powers; and he never forgot that it is the duty (and privilege) of a Manchu prince to dispense justice — after his own fashion.

A QUATRAIN OF LING TAI FU'S

by DONN BYRNE

BECAUSE of his perfect, or nearly perfect, English there were many who believed that Li Sin was only masquerading as a Chinese. Because of the slightly slit Mongol eyes, and the swarthy color of his skin, there were others who explained his enigma by guessing he was a half-breed. It never occurred to either party that Li Sin had been sent to Eton in England, at the age of thirteen, and that from Eton he had gone to Oxford. They would not have believed it if you told them.

It never occurred to them, either, that Li Sin was a Manchu duke, with a genealogy that extended back to the days of Tang. It never occurred to them that the slant-eyed Manchu was as big a physician as any of the high-

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priced practitioners on Park Avenue. To the descendants of fur-peddlers the deck-scrubbers who graced the Social Register, or to the millionaires of Long Island who had soared into the financial heavens on an accidental oil-spout or who had amassed their fortunes by the less reputable forms of mine-grabbing — to these, and to their wives and daughters, Li Sin was merely a tradesman or shopkeeper. It did not particularly matter to them that his shop on Fifth Avenue was filled with little gold Buddhas whose eyes were fine emeralds, with pieces of lacquer which it had taken an artist his lifetime to do, with peachblow vases transparent as a hand against the sun, with porcelains sheer as fine silks. But the strictures of the ignorant did not worry Li Sin in the least. He would only raise his eyebrows and smile his bland, inscrutable smile.

Li Sin has left Fifth Avenue now, left his store which was in those days a temple of truth as well as a temple of beauty. In his own city of Tientsin the Manchu lives in stately leisure. He has reverted to his own name, Hsien Po, which is great in Manchu annals. He has reverted to his Manchu dress of brocaded blouse and silken trousers, to his mandarin's cap with its mandarin's button.

He is gone now, is Li Sin, but I can see him as plainly as though he were standing beside me. A rather squat sort of man, with a squarish face and high cheek-bones. His shining black hair was parted smoothly at the side, and there was a look of health in the transparent quality of his brown skin and in the whites of his slanting eyes. There was always a quiet smile on his lips, and he wore the tweed and broadcloth of America with as much ease as the blouse and silken trousers of his own land. The only Oriental hint in his clothes was the suppressed gorgeousness of his neckties. He roamed about his great store, passing an occasional word with the attendants or stopping to greet a favorite customer, which was an honor. The customers were much in awe of Li Sin. There were incidents that had taught them to respect him.

There was the incident of the amateur pottery expert who happened to be also a millionaire. He noticed a vase of delicate blue jade.

"Oh, Li Sin," he said, "I want that. That's a wonderful piece of Ming."

"It's not Ming," the Manchu told him.

"I tell you it is Ming!" the millionaire insisted. "I'll buy it."

"I'm afraid you won't, Mr. Rensselaer," the Manchu answered blandly. "I won't sell it to you."

"Then you'll sell me nothing, ever again," Rensselaer decreed angrily.

"Oh, very well," Li Sin smiled.

To Morganstern, the munitions magnate, he was much shorter. The bulky financier rushed into the store rolling a cigar between his fat lips. He wanted a rug, he said, an expensive one, the best in the store. Li Sin smiled a trifle cynically and pointed out something on the wall.

"A Persian thirteenth-century," he

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explained curtly. "Used to belong to a shah of Persia. It costs seventeen thousand dollars."

"I'll take it," Morganstern nodded. "I want something for the bedroom floor."

"But, dear sir," Li Sin expostulated, "one doesn't put that on the floor. One hangs it on a wall."

"I don't care a damn." The munitions man drew out his check book. "Anything good enough for the shah of Persia's wall is good enough for my feet."

"My good sir —" Li Sin's voice was as bland as ever — "you are making a mistake. There are several grass-rug emporiums on Second Avenue. Go into the next drugstore and look one up in a telephone book. Take a trolley across Fifty-ninth Street. They'll sell you one, and you can carry it home beneath your arm." And abruptly he left Morganstern.

These things created a legend about Li Sin that will never die on the Avenue. Cynics say that it was good advertising, and brought people who liked to be insulted. But we, who knew the Manchu, were certain that was the last thing he had in mind.

Peculiar as Li Sin's business habits were, more peculiar still were his friends. Among them might be counted a European ambassador in Washington, a great heavyweight wrestler, a little Roman Catholic priest, a headwaiter in a restaurant. All of these people he liked for some quality that his shrewd eyes had discovered. And last but not least was Irene Johns.

She had come into the store one soft spring morning, looking for a birthday present for her mother, something inexpensive, she said, about two dollars, all — she laughed merrily — she could afford. Perhaps it was that gurgling laugh of hers, that limpid, hurried, harmonious scale, that drew Li Sin's attention. He came forward with a suggestion when she and the salesman became nonplussed at the problem of finding something pretty, good, and worth two dollars.

"Perhaps I can help," he smiled.

She impressed him with her appearance as much as with her laugh. There was something so ethereal about her that she seemed less a being of flesh and blood than the disembodied spirit of spring. Her fair hair, her starlit purple eyes, her eager, half-closed small mouth with its glint of little teeth, her slim neck stood out against her heather costume and black, sweeping hat like a softly modulated light. She was so little, so slender, that she seemed as delicate as a snowflake. She moved with the lightness of a feather stirring along the ground. And yet, Li Sin saw with his physician's eye, she was not fragile. She was as healthy as an athlete.

"I think I can find you something," he said.

He did. In the rear of the store he discovered a roughly hammered silver brooch from Bokhara, a marvel of intricacy and sweeping lines; he had bought it in Bokhara himself for two rubles. The thing had interested him.

"But this must be more than two

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dollars!" She spoke in wonder.

"I paid one dollar for it in Bokhara, and I am exacting a dollar profit for it, which is not too little," the Manchu answered gravely.

By what peculiar, invisible steps their friendship ripened it would be impossible to detail; but ripen it did. The fresh, fair American beauty, slim and beautiful as a Tanagra figurine, and the squat, middle-aged Mongol liked each other, came to appreciate each other. She had an inborn love for beautiful things, and he was never weary of showing her the treasures of his store. He showed her strange, exotic jewels, collected by dead kings and queens — chrysoberyls that were at times the strange green of olives and at other times red like a setting sun, topazes with the yellow of aged wine, sunstones that glowed with a tremulous golden red, carbuncles that flashed into explosive stars of scarlet, peridots and milky moonstones, a ruby that the King of Ceylon had owned, and an emerald that had once belonged to the unhappy Queen of Scots. Irene Johns would gasp at the sight of these things.

"They're so beautiful!" she would say. "They make the tears come to my eyes!"

That was enough for Li Sin, that gasp of appreciation. He loved the things so much himself. He had hunted his treasures up and down the earth and to and fro in it, and he wanted them to be gazed on with the appreciative eye rather than with the cold look of barter and exchange. He liked this little twenty-year-old woman, because she had the spirit of beauty within her, and because she seemed so fair and fresh and unprotected. And she liked the swarthy Mongol, not for his strange, exotic setting, but for the sheer kindliness of him, the great, expansive benevolence and his consummate courtesy, which after all was nothing but the birthright of a Manchu prince.

There could be no question of love between them, for many reasons, and never a thought of it passed their minds. She might have been something like a niece to him, and he her benevolent uncle. They never met outside his store — except once.

He drew from her the story of what of life she had known, carefully, gently, like the skilled surgeon extracting a splinter from flesh. The daughter of a naval surgeon who had died while she was still young — and who, Li Sin shrewdly guessed, had been somewhat of a blackguard — she lived poorly with her mother, on a meager pension. She had been brought up decently, educated well, at what must have been a terrible expense to the mother. She had not been married, beautiful as she was, because she had not mixed with people who were to be regarded as beneath her in social rank. The people of her own station were too poor to marry offhand — but there was a young ensign she mentioned as having met once or twice, and there was a faint blush on her cheeks as she spoke of it. For the illustrious and the moneyed she had either

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too little fortune or too little lineage.

"Too bad!" Li Sin murmured to himself, and his thoughts would have done credit to the most adroit of *schatchen*. "Too bad!"

She would breeze in, if such a word may be used of her who was as gentle as a zephyr, bringing always with her the sweetness of spring.

"Good morning!" she would greet him eagerly. "I wonder if we could find something — I want a clasp for my hair, for evening wear — something frightfully inexpensive."

"I think we might find it." Li Sin would smile, and he would find it. He took her money, and gave her the article at a just profit on what he had paid for it. The only thing gratuitous he gave her was the travel and the adventure necessary to pick up his wonderful trifles. Of this he said nothing, and she was none the wiser.

There came the day when she entered a little excited, a little afraid, a little nervous. She wanted something more expensive than usual. She was going out that night, she explained, with somebody.

"I am going to be married soon," she blurted out. "I am engaged."

"To whom?" Li Sin asked quietly.

"A friend of my father's," she answered blushingly. "Roderick Dreghorn, the ivory-hunter."

"I wonder if I might ask you to do something," Li Sin said slowly, "and that is: will you bring your fiancé here some day so I may congratulate him?"

"I should love to," she said; and she left him, excitedly happy, Li Sin saw; but he also noticed that she seemed a little terrified, a little aghast.

I have told the story of Li Sin to many people, now that he is gone to his home and is happy there with his poor and his pear-trees, and some of them have believed me because they know China and the manner of man Li Sin is, and some of them have believed me because they know I abhor lies as I abhor the devil. But many cannot understand it. They cannot see why a Manchu duke should become a merchant on Fifth Avenue.

"And if he is as great a doctor as you say —" they object.

There is a passage in Isaiah, I believe, which speaks of Tyre, "whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honorable of the earth." Marco Polo, that ancient Venetian, says of Cathay that there, of all professions, the most esteemed is that of merchant. It is above arms, he says, above learning. And what obtained in the Yellow Empire when Hoang-ti led his people across the desert in the misty dawn of time obtains today, from the outer sea to the confines of Mongolia. An ancient and honorable thing it is, a fit profession for princes, a thing pregnant with ideals of honesty and fair dealing, a clean thing. There is nothing anomalous to the eye in Li Sin, a Manchu duke, unearthing the treasures of forgotten days for the New World, and exacting a just profit for the work.

As for the medicine, that was another matter. I could no more im-

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agine Li Sin accepting money for his healing art than I can imagine him stealing alms from a blind beggar. The thing was far too holy for him. There in that glass-topped studio in his house on Fifth Avenue, above the great treasure-store, he studied his science with the enthusiasm of an amateur pursuing a hobby. A queer place it was, with its retorts and vials, its glinting instruments, its X-ray apparatus, its tubes of deadly serum and of healing drugs. And besides these were the quaint adjuncts of Oriental healing: the twisted tubes of herbs, instruments that seemed like an alchemist's dream, medicines of black, occult art as well as of benevolence, secret, untraceable poisons, liquids which, it is whispered, would bring the dead to life for minutes, which would drive men mad.

Ask the taciturn Lee Fong, on Mott Street, that slant-eyed millionaire. Ask the leaders of the Hip Sing. At the Five Companies of San Francisco, inquire. They will speak of Li Sin as a demigod of medicine.

One hasn't to go as far as that to find out. There is a tenement-house on Hudson Street, where the Bracalellos live. There is a romping child there called Beata. For years she was an object of research to physicians in hospitals, because of her twisted spine. Nothing could be done, they decided. They were wrong. Li Sin saw the white-cheeked child carried in the subway on a horrible metal stretcher, strapped to it. It hurt him — the illnesses of children always hurt him. He took charge of her. She romps about now as other children do. There are many cases of that kind.

But above all in my mind there is the tragic case of Mrs. Madge Eaton, who is now happy as a woman farmer on Long Island. Li Sin discovered her creeping up an alley-way to die from hunger, shame, and heartbreak. Against all protestation he took her home. Her story was tragic and very sordid. She had married John Eaton, a man who had come up to Maine for a holiday. He had brought her to New York. In a month he had sent her out to work. She fell ill. Eaton deserted her, taking with him all her jewelry, all her money, all her clothes. When she was discovered, she was sent to a hospital, and when she emerged from there, she found herself without courage to kill herself and without the wherewithal to live. The police sent her to jail two weeks later. When she came out, Li Sin found her, broken, hungry, terrified, wanting to die and yet without courage to face the river.

He cured her. He brought her back to life and hope and strength. By some means he instilled into that frail and timid heart courage. But he did one thing, unknown to her, of which she might not have approved.

There was a tripartite function of Li Sin's: Firstly, there was that of the merchant, whose duty it was to discover and barter rare and costly things. Secondly came the physician's, to heal body and mind. Thirdly came that of the Manchu prince, to dispense justice.

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He called Hong Kop, his body-servant, to him — that subtle and inscrutable Cantonese. He looked at the card on which he had scribbled an address, an address he had extracted from Mrs. Eaton.

"Hong Kop, you will go at once to Colon, in Panama," he announced. "You will go to this address — a gambling-house — and there you will pick up the trail of John Eaton. You will pick up the trail and follow it until you find him. And when you do find him —"

He paused for an instant. The Cantonese bowed.

"You will kill him, Hong Kop."

Six feet tall, spare as a lance, tanned to a deep brown, hatchet-faced and yet handsome in some daredevil, hypnotic way, with eyes that glinted with the vindictive sheen of a rifle-barrel, mouth twisted slightly — enough to show the cruelty hidden within — Roderick Dreghorn lounged into the store with Irene Johns. There was an amused smile on his powerful face, as though it pleased him whimsically to accompany his fiancée on a shopping expedition, to meet her queer friends.

"Li Sin," she said, "this is the man I am going to marry."

The Manchu smiled gravely. Dreghorn watched him with an amused, contemptuous glance.

"There is no need to wish felicity," said Li Sin, courteously, "to the future husband of Miss Johns." And Dreghorn nodded in an offhand way. The hunter turned to the girl.

"Didn't you want to get something here?" he asked, "some silk or something?" Li Sin noted beneath the man's soft tones the concealed edge that could cut on occasion like a rawhide whip. Rapidly Li Sin was summing the man up in his mind: forty-five, he decided, a man of the world, a gentleman born, an utter blackguard, a man who had done and seen evil things. He had money, too — witness the plain but expensive cut of his brown tweeds. Li Sin noted quickly a faint scar on the temple that he knew to be an old bullet-wound, and a weal across the fingers of the right hand that only a long knife could have made.

"Would you care to come and help Miss Johns select the silk?" Li Sin asked. Dreghorn smiled, and there was a lift to the left corner of his mouth that showed the teeth. It was like a dog's threatening snarl.

"I don't think so," he drawled. "I am not interested in any products of the yellow or black countries."

"Indeed!" Li Sin murmured.

Excitedly, at the end of the store, Irene Johns told her story. Dreghorn — in a moment of boredom, Li Sin judged — had dropped in to see the family of a man he had known fifteen years before in Hongkong. He had heard of Mrs. Johns and her daughter from some casual acquaintance. Li Sin smiled; the casual acquaintance had spoken of the daughter's beauty, most probably. Mr. Dreghorn had been so kind to all of them! He had taken them out, had showered presents on

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them, had in the end asked her to marry him.

"Indeed!" Li Sin thought, and he encouraged her to go on.

He was so big, so powerful, she hinted. He had done big things, had had great adventures. She seemed a little aghast as she mentioned that. He was so compelling, she said.

"She is not in love," thought Li Sin. "She is hypnotized."

He was going on one more expedition, she told the Manchu. After that, he was coming home to settle down.

"Agh!" Li Sin exclaimed to himself. So that was it. The old, old story, as old as Cain: the rake, the scoundrel, after sucking the world dry of wickedness, wanted a wife, home, and children. Li Sin could understand how the girl's purity, her lightness, her youth, had appealed to the world-worn rascal. He could understand the visions the man had — the sweet, hawthorn-scented dreams. It was like a murderer seeking to wash the blood from his hands with God's pure water.

They left. Li Sin escorted them courteously to the door.

"Goodbye!" he wished them.

"Goodbye, my yellow friend," Dreghorn answered contemptuously. Irene Johns did not hear it.

Li Sin went above to his apartment. He clapped his hands for Hong Kop.

"You will go down, Hong Kop, to the house of Ling Wah Lee —"

The Cantonese made his eternal bow.

"And you will have him find out for me, Hong Kop, all there is to be known about Roderick Dreghorn, hunter of ivory, with a bullet-mark on the forehead and the weal of a Burmese knife on the right hand."

There is a doctrine in one of the faiths that man is born in original sin, and that unless he is cleansed by sacrament he is until the end of time the property of the evil one. There is an article of dogma in the same faith that one may become possessed of demons. If this is true, then never a sacrament was said over Dreghorn, nor ever was he confronted with the exorcist's mystic and terrible formula. Hell seemed to have employed him all his life and to have made him its brain and hand. The first of the story was bad enough, with its record of treachery, of gainful crimes in the dark lands, of murders concealed and never explained. Even Li Sin's worldly-wise mind was shocked by Hong Kop's report. There was the incident in the Belgian Congo when Dreghorn, allied with a corrupt Belgian official, burned a village with all the inhabitants, shooting down those who tried to escape from the flames. They had not produced enough ivory.

"Even madness will not explain that!" Li Sin shook his head.

There was the incident during the period of the Boxer chaos in Yuen-Lau, when Dreghorn and an associate had tortured an old mandarin, hoping to make him unearth treasure. They had given him the torture of the bow-string, and the water torture, and the torture of red metal at his feet.

"And he an old man," Li Sin

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thought, "four-score and five!"

There was the incident in Mombasaland when the fiendish natives had captured a lone hunter of ivory, had crucified him on the ground, smeared with honey for the ants, delirious under the smashing sun. Dreghorn could have rescued him, for he was well-armed and had a large party of natives. But he contented himself with stealing the man's ivory and leaving him there to die.

"That is one thing for which there is no punishment," Li Sin thought. "No punishment is equal in horror."

Li Sin read another incident, and he read no farther. It was the story of Marie Tirlemont, called *Flancs-de-neige*, whom Dreghorn had brought with him from Maxim's in Paris, down to the Congo. She had ceased to amuse Dreghorn a hundred miles south of Léopoldville, and he had abandoned her alone, in a village of black beasts.

And now Dreghorn, Li Sin mused, wanted to marry. He wanted to marry this fair little American girl, pure and delicate as the petal of a primrose, light and shimmering and gay as irridescence on water — to make a home with her, to have her bear children.

He called for Hong Kop.

"What is the profit of crime, Hong Kop?" he asked.

"The profit of crime is death," he answered.

"Death is a sweet and gentle thing, Hong Kop," his master mused. "It comes to the old like a gentle and sweet-scented sleep. It comes to the suffering like a greatful anodyne. It is not the profit of crime, Hong Kop, except for those who wish much to live."

He mused again, joining his fingertips together and knitting his brows.

"Unless, instead of being a sweet sleep, it is a nightmare, Hong Kop! Unless, instead of being an anodyne, it is a horror! Unless it comes accompanied by a huge and monstrous fear, a terror that clutches the heartstrings, a fear that kills!"

He was going away on the morrow, Dreghorn said. He would be away for six months, and then he would return, and they would be married. He wanted to buy her something before he left, a ring or a bracelet.

"But she wanted to buy it here," he sneered at Li Sin.

"I wanted to buy it here," she replied, "because here I can get the most beautiful things in the world."

"If you care for that yellow junk," Dreghorn laughed shortly.

"Roderick!" she protested quickly. She was pained through and through. Li Sin smiled reassuringly at her. But Dreghorn wandered on.

"She spoke of getting the house at Huntingdon decorated in some Oriental style," Dreghorn laughed. "She can have it if she wants it. But I don't see why she couldn't have it done in honest white style."

Li Sin smiled blandly as ever.

"You don't seem to have a high opinion of Asia or Africa," he remarked casually.

"I have no use for any color except

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white," Dreghorn answered brutally.

"It is a harsh thing," Li Sin reproved him. Irene Johns stood by, pale, nervous, and hurt. "It is a grievous thing to wound the body, but it is a more grievous thing to wound the soul. And to wound it unjustly is more grievous still."

"I deal in facts," Dreghorn laughed.

"May I show you a fact?" Li Sin went on. "You have been in China, and if I mistake not, you read Chinese."

"Among my many accomplishments," Dreghorn sneered, "is the reading of Chinese."

Irene looked at him with a sort of fearful agony in her eyes. She had never seen his brutality creep out before, and she was shocked at the sight of him lolling across the counter and striving his utmost to hurt the smiling Manchu. Li Sin took up a book from behind him, a broad, thin book, the stiff parchment pages of which were edged with gold. He opened it carefully. The leaves had the stiffness of steel.

"These are the verses of Ling Tai Fu, of Tientsin," the Manchu said, "a poet of the last century who had traveled into Russia. He complains bitterly of the same prejudice, and he deals with facts, which you deal with. Here is his poem 'The Return.' Perhaps you will translate it."

Dreghorn looked down the page smilingly.

"They have laughed at me, they of the North — me, of the race of Chang!
Because of my skin like an autumn leaf,
because of my slitted eyes,
Because they were white as the sun, they said, white as light!
And yet — whiter than white is the leper.

White is the hibiscus tree with fluttering blossoms, white as they!
But whiter than it is the snow which numbs its roots in the ground!
White are the men of the North as the sun, white as light!
And yet — whiter than white is the leper."

Dreghorn laughed easily. Irene shivered with horror. Li Sin smiled.

"Those are facts," the Manchu said.

"Is there any more of this?" the hunter asked, turning over the leaf.

"No more," Li Sin answered. "I should have warned you about these leaves. You have cut your hand."

Dreghorn looked at his left thumb. The edge of the book-leaf had sheared into it as sharp and as painlessly as the edge of a razor. A few minute drops of blood showed on the skin.

"You had better have a little peroxide," Li Sin suggested.

"I'm not a child," Dreghorn laughed. "It isn't anything. Come on, Irene."

They left the store together, and as was his wont with favored customers, Li Sin saw them to the door. The girl was flushed with mortification, and she shot the Manchu a mute appeal of apology. Dreghorn smiled again.

"*Au revoir*, my poetical friend," he laughed.

"Goodbye!" answered Li Sin, gravely.

Li Sin saw little of Irene Jones for the next six weeks. Once she came

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into the store, but she was nervous and flushed, as though she thought the Manchu would hold against her the insults Dreghorn had offered him. But he took pains to show her that he and she were as close friends as ever.

"Mr. Dreghorn will be back in six months?" the Manchu said.

"In six months," she answered listlessly. "He has gone to Abyssinia."

"And you will be married soon after?"

"Immediately he comes back, he insists," she said.

The glamor and hypnotism and force of the man's presence no longer enthralled her, Li Sin could see. She was fearful of the step she was taking. But she was certain it was going to take place. Once Dreghorn returned, the quality of his masterfulness would grind down all opposition, even were she to show any.

"I want you to come in soon," Li Sin told her. "I have some things coming from Peking I want you to see."

But she did not come in. In place of her there entered the store, six weeks after Dreghorn had sailed, a tall, heavily-built young man with a tanned face. He asked for Mr. Sin.

"I am Li Sin," the Manchu told him.

"My name is Gray, surgeon on the Cunarder *Hibernia*, between New York and Algiers. Miss Jones asked me to tell you something, and she would like to see you, if it is not asking too much. She is prostrated at home. Her fiancé is dead."

"Mr. Dreghorn is dead!" Li Sin commented simply. "How?"

"He came out of the smoking-room one night, after talking to me about his intended," the surgeon went on glibly. He seemed to be repeating something he had rehearsed. "We were off Algiers, and though the night was fine, a cross-sea was running. He said he would not turn in for a half-hour yet, and the last I saw of him he was leaning against the starboard rail of the boat-deck. We never saw anything more of him. There can be no doubt that he fell overboard."

Li Sin studied him for a few minutes silently.

"Dr. Gray," he said simply, "you will pardon a man who is twenty years older than you, and who has seen much of the world and much of life, but — that is not what happened. Dr. Gray, how did Dreghorn die?

"I know Miss Johns," Li Sin went on, "and I knew Dreghorn."

"If you know Miss Johns," the young surgeon blurted out suddenly, "you know the best and most beautiful woman I have ever seen; and if you knew Dreghorn, you knew the damnedest scoundrel unhanged."

"That, too, I know," said Li Sin.

He waited an instant. The surgeon was uncomfortably silent.

"Dr. Gray," the Manchu insisted, "of what did Dreghorn die?"

"If you want to know, and have the right to know," Gray burst out savagely, "the man died because he had contracted the most virulent case of leprosy I have ever seen in the

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tropics. How he did it, God only knows. He was quite well when he left New York except for a rash on his left hand. He must have been impregnated with some horrible virus. In a few days I had to manacle him in his cabin. For a week the man was a shrieking maniac. I thought something might be done when we got to port. There was no chance. In Algiers they would have put him in the leper colony. So one night I took him up to the boat-deck and let him go overboard."

There was an instant's silence.

"I knew of the man," the doctor said bitterly, "and I can't even pray to God for his soul!"

"But I must!" said Li Sin.

"You will go up and see Miss Johns," the surgeon reminded him. "She will get over it."

"She will get over it, and be happy, and marry a good man," the Manchu told him. "I will go to see her." And they parted.

He went upstairs to his apartment, very slowly. Softly he clapped his hands. The silent Cantonese came.

"Hong Kop," he asked, "tell me, Hong Kop, you who are young, how does love come?"

In fluting, sibilant Cantonese the servant answered:

"There is beauty," he said, "and it calls to manliness with the call of cymbals. They meet and wing upward, as Chung Tzu wrote, 'like a hymn recited softly at the death of day.'"

"There is beauty, and there is manliness!" the Manchu mused. "There is Irene Johns, and there is —" He smiled an instant, and then became as grave as ever. "You will go to Brooklyn, to the Navy Yard, Hong Kop, and you will find for me an ensign called Nelson. You will find where he is, Hong Kop. . . .

"I am getting old, Hong Kop, I am getting old. The pear gardens of Tientsin are bursting into silver and mauve. Again with the spring the musicians tune their lutes of jade. The throbbing chords do not awaken me. Hong Kop, I am old."

He rose wearily.

"Call the gray limousine, Hong Kop," he directed, "and then go on your errand."

He stretched his arms out for his fur coat, but suddenly he remembered something. He went upstairs to the glass-roofed laboratory; taking a parcel from a bronze chest, and unwrapping the antiseptic-soaked coverings, he brought out a book, a broad, thin book, the stiff parchment pages of which were edged with gold. Carefully he lighted the muffle-furnace, and carefully he placed the volume in it. And while he waited for the volume to be consumed, softly he began to recite a quatrain from it, a quatrain of Ling Tai Fu's:

"White is the hibiscus tree with fluttering blossoms, white as they!
But whiter than it is the snow which numbs its roots in the ground!
White are the men of the North as the sun, white as light!
And yet — whiter than white is the leper."

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It is nearly fifty years since "The Man Who Disappeared" was first published in an English magazine, and a lot of water has flowed over Detective Dam since that time. Nevertheless, we bring you a condensed version of the story, if only for nostalgia's sake, and to point out its interesting historical significance. You will find in "The Man Who Disappeared" a perfect example of the pseudo-scientific detective story which was all the rage a half-century ago. It is a perfect example, too, of the early medico-mystery story of which so many were written by Mrs. L. T. Meade alone, and by Mrs. Meade in collaboration with either Dr. Clifford Halifax or Robert Eustace [Dr. Eustace Barton].

"The Man Who Disappeared" can only be described as sui generis. *It bears no real relationship to, say, the Sherlock Holmes short stories which appeared during the same period; nor is there any fundamental blood-connection between this type of story and the truly scientific detective short stories which began to appear shortly after — like R. Austin Freeman's tales of Dr. Thorndyke.*

And yet stories à la Meade have retained a powerful grip on our affections. In a letter to your Editor, John Dickson Carr once referred to them as "pre-detective-story detective stories — that is, stories written before 1920, yet containing the germ of the modern fairplay school." In particular, Mr. Carr liked, among others, the work in this field of L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace. "In those days," John continued, "it was the custom to begin with an arrestingly grotesque or impossible problem, and supply a twist ending which was sometimes naive but usually ingenious. It seems unfortunate that the habit is dying out in a clueless riot of gunplay."

Well, before the old technique does die out, before you have forgotten the flavor of the past, here is a genuine Meade-Eustace museum-piece — an authentic turn-of-the-century thriller.

THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

by L. T. MEADE and ROBERT EUSTACE

I AM a lawyer by profession, and have a snug set of chambers in Chancery Lane. My name is Charles Pleydell.

On a certain morning towards the end of September in the year 1897 I received the following letter: —

SIR, — I have been asked to call on you by a mutual friend, General Cornwallis, who says that he thinks you can give me

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advice on a matter of some importance.

I am a Spanish lady. My home is in Brazil, and I know nothing of England or of English ways. I wish, however, to take a house near London and to settle down. This house must be situated in the neighborhood of a large moor or common. It must have grounds surrounding it, and must have extensive cellars or basements, as my wish is to furnish a laboratory in order to carry on scientific research. I am willing to pay any sum in reason for a desirable habitation, but one thing is essential: the house must be as near London as is possible under the above conditions.—Yours obediently, STELLA SCAIFFE.

Now, it so happened that a client of mine had asked me a few months before to try and let his house — an old-fashioned and somewhat gruesome mansion, situated on a lonely part of Hampstead Heath. It occurred to me that this house would exactly suit the lady whose letter I had just read.

At eleven o'clock one of my clerks brought me in a card. On it were written the words, "Miss Muriel Scaiffe." I desired the man to show the lady in, and a moment later a slight, fair-haired English girl entered.

"Mrs. Scaiffe is not quite well and has sent me in her stead. You have received a letter from my stepmother, have you not, Mr. Pleydell?"

"I have," I replied. "Will you sit down, Miss Scaiffe?"

She did so. I looked at her attentively. She was young and pretty, and there was a certain anxiety about her face which she could not quite repress.

"Your stepmother," I said, "requires a house with somewhat peculiar conditions?"

"Oh, yes," the girl answered. "She is very anxious on the subject. We want to be settled within a week."

"It so happens, Miss Scaiffe, that there is a place called The Rosary at Hampstead which may suit you. Here are the particulars. Read them over for yourself."

She read the description eagerly, then she said: "I am sure Mrs. Scaiffe would like to see this house. When can we go?"

"Today, if you like, and if you wish, I can meet you at The Rosary at three o'clock."

"That will do nicely," she answered.

The rest of the morning passed as usual, and at the appointed hour I presented myself at the gates of The Rosary. A carriage was already drawn up there, and as I approached a tall lady with very dark eyes stepped out.

A glance showed me that the young lady had not accompanied her.

"You are Mr. Pleydell?" she said, holding out her hand to me, and speaking in excellent English.

"Yes," I answered.

"You saw my stepdaughter this morning?"

"Yes," I said again.

"I have called to see the house," she continued. "Muriel tells me that it is likely to suit my requirements. Will you show it to me?"

I opened the gates, and we entered a wide carriage-drive. The Rosary had been unlet for some months, and

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weeds partly covered the avenue. The grounds had a desolate and gloomy appearance, leaves were falling thickly from the trees, and altogether the entire place looked undesirable and neglected.

The Spanish lady, however, seemed delighted with everything. She looked around her with sparkling glances. Flashing her dark eyes into my face, she praised the trees and avenue, the house, and all the house contained.

She remarked that the rooms were spacious, the lobbies wide; above all things, the cellars numerous.

"I am particular about the cellars, Mr. Pleydell," she said.

"Indeed!" I answered. "At all events, there are plenty of them."

"Oh, yes! And this one is so large. It will quite suit our purpose. We will turn it into a laboratory.

"My brother and I — Oh, I have not told you about my brother. He is a Spaniard — Señor Merello — he joins us here next week. He and I are scientists, and I hope scientists of no mean order. We have come to England for the purpose of experimenting. In this land of the free we can do what we please. We feel, Mr. Pleydell — you look so sympathizing that I cannot help confiding in you — we feel that we are on the verge of a very great — a very astounding discovery, at which the world, yes, the whole world will wonder. This house is the one of all others for our purpose. When can we take possession?"

I asked several questions, which were all answered to my satisfaction, and finally returned to town, prepared to draw up a lease by which the house and grounds known as The Rosary, Hampstead Heath, were to be handed over at a very high rent to Mrs. Scaiffe.

I felt pleased at the good stroke of business which I had done for a client, and had no apprehensions of any sort. Little did I guess what that afternoon's work would mean to me, and still more to one whom I had ever been proud to call my greatest friend.

Everything went off without a hitch. The Rosary passed into the hands of Mrs. Scaiffe, and also into the hands of her brother, Señor Merello, a tall, dark, very handsome man, bearing all over him the well-known characteristics of a Spanish don.

A week or two went by and the affair had well-nigh passed my memory, when one afternoon I heard eager, excited words in my clerks' room, and the next moment my head clerk entered, followed by the fair-haired English-looking girl who had called herself Muriel Scaiffe.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Pleydell," she said, in great agitation. "Can I see you alone, and at once?"

"Certainly," I answered. I motioned to the clerk to leave us and helped the young lady to a chair.

"I cannot stay a moment," she began. "Even now I am followed. Mr. Pleydell, he has told me that he knows you; it was on that account I

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persuaded my stepmother to come to you about a house. You are his greatest friend, for he has said it."

"Of whom are you talking?" I asked, in a bewildered tone.

"Of Oscar Digby!" she replied. "The great traveller, the great discoverer, the greatest, most single-minded, the grandest man of his age. You know him? Yes — yes."

She paused for breath. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Indeed, I do know him," I answered. "He is my very oldest friend. Where is he? What is he doing?"

She had risen. Her hands were clasped tightly together, her face was white as death.

"He is on his way to England," she answered. "Even now he may have landed. He brings great news, and the moment he sets foot in London he is in danger."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you what I mean. I dare not. He is your friend, and it is your province to save him."

"But from what, Miss Scaiffe?"

She trembled and now, as though she could not stand any longer, dropped into a chair.

"I am not brave enough to explain things more fully," she said. "I can only repeat my words, 'Your friend is in danger.' Tell him — if you can, if you will — to have nothing to do with *us*. Keep him, at all risks, away from *us*. If he mentions us pretend that you do not know anything about us. I would not speak like this if I had not cause — the gravest. When we took The Rosary I did not believe that matters were so awful; indeed, then I was unaware that Mr. Digby was returning to London. But last night I overheard. . . . Oh! Mr. Pleydell, I can tell you no more. Keep Oscar Digby away from The Rosary! Tell him that I — yes, I, Muriel Scaiffe — wish it!"

She was trembling more terribly than ever. She took out her handkerchief to wipe the moisture from her brow.

"I must fly," she said. "If this visit is discovered my life is worth very little."

After she had gone I sat in absolute amazement. All day her extraordinary words haunted me, and when, on the next day, Digby, whom I had not seen for years, unexpectedly called, I remembered Miss Scaiffe's visit with a queer and ever-increasing sense of apprehension.

Digby had been away from London for several years. Before he went he and I had shared the same rooms, had gone about together, and had been chums in the fullest sense of the word. It was delightful to see him once again. His hearty, loud laugh fell refreshingly on my ears, and one or two glances into his face removed my fears. After all, it was impossible to associate danger with one so big, so burly, with such immense physical strength. His broad forehead, his keen, frank, blue eyes, his smiling mouth, his strong and muscular hands, all denoted strength of mind and body.

"Well," he said, "here I am, and

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I have a good deal to tell you. I want your help also, old man. It is your business to introduce me to the most promising and most enterprising financier of the day. I have it in my power, Pleydell, to make his fortune, and yours, and my own, and half-a-dozen other people's as well."

"Tell me all about it," I said.

He came nearer to me and dropped his voice a trifle.

"I have made an amazing discovery," he said, "and that is one reason why I have hurried back to London. I do not know whether you are sufficiently conversant with extraordinary and out-of-the-way places on our globe. But anyhow, I may as well tell you that there is a wonderful region, as yet very little known, which lies on the watershed of the Essequibo and Amazon rivers. In that region are situated the old Montes de Cristæs or Crystal Mountains, the disputed boundary between British Guiana and Brazil. There also, according to the legend, was supposed to be the wonderful lost city of Manos. Many expeditions were sent out to discover it in the seventeenth century, and it was the Eldorado of Sir Walter Raleigh's famous expedition in 1615, the failure of which cost him his head."

I could not help laughing.

"This sounds like an old geography lesson. What have you to do with this *terra incognita?*"

"Do not think me mad," he said, "for I speak in all sanity. I have found the lost Eldorado!"

"Nonsense!" I cried.

"It is true. I do not mean to say that I have found the mythical city of gold; that, of course, does not exist. But what I have discovered is a spot close to Lake Amacu that is simply laden with gold. The estimates computed on my specimens and reports make it out to be the richest place in the world. The whole thing is, as yet, a close secret, and I have come to London now to put it into the hands of a big financier."

"By Jove!" I cried. "You astonish me."

"The thing will create an enormous sensation," he went on, "and I shall be a millionaire; that is, if the secret does not leak out."

"The secret," I cried.

"Yes, the secret of its exact locality."

I was silent for a moment, then I said: "Horace Lancaster is the biggest financier in the whole of London. He is undoubtedly your man. If you can satisfy him with your reports, charts, and specimens he can float the company. You must see him at once, Digby."

"Yes, that is what I want," he cried.

"I will telephone to his office at once."

I rang the bell for my clerk and gave him directions.

He left the room. In a few moments he returned with the information that Lancaster was in Paris.

"He won't be back for a week, sir," said the clerk and left the room.

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"Are you prepared to wait?" I asked Digby.

"I must, I suppose," he said. "But it is provoking. Shall we talk over matters tonight, Pleydell? Will you dine with me at my club?"

"With a heart and a half," I answered.

"By the way," continued Digby, "some friends of mine — Brazilians — ought to be in London now: a lady of the name of Scaiffe, with her pretty little stepdaughter, an English girl. I should like to introduce you to them. . . . Why, Pleydell, what is the matter?"

I was silent for a moment; then I said: "If I were you I would have nothing to do with these people. I happen to know their whereabouts, and —"

"Well?" he said, opening his eyes in amazement.

"The little girl does not want you to call on them, Digby. Take her advice."

To my astonishment I saw that the big fellow seemed quite upset at my remarks, and a few moments later he left me.

That evening Digby and I dined together. We afterwards went exhaustively into the great subject of his discovery. He showed me his specimens and reports, and, in short, so completely fired my enthusiasm that I was all impatience for Lancaster's return. The thing was a big thing, one worth fighting for. We said no more about Mrs. Scaiffe, and I hoped that my friend would not fall into the hands of a woman who, I began to fear, was little better than an adventuress.

Three or four days passed. Lancaster was still detained in Paris, and Digby was evidently eating his heart out with impatience at the unavoidable delay in getting his great scheme floated.

One afternoon he burst noisily into my presence.

"Well," he cried. "Muriel has discovered herself. Talk of women and their pranks! She came to see me at my hotel. She declared that she could not keep away. I just took the little thing in my arms and hugged her. We are going to be married when the company is floated. Ha! ha! my friend. I know all about the secret retreat of the Scaiffes by this time. Little Muriel told me herself. I dine there tonight, and they want you to come, too."

I was about to refuse when, as if in a vision, the strange, entreating, suffering face of Muriel Scaiffe, as I had seen it the day she implored me to save my friend, rose up before my eyes. Whatever her present inexplicable conduct might mean, I would go with Digby tonight.

We arrived at The Rosary between seven and eight o'clock. Mrs. Scaiffe received us in Oriental splendor. Her dress was a wonder of magnificence. Diamonds flashed in her raven black hair and glittered round her shapely neck. She was certainly one of the most splendid-looking women I had ever seen, and Digby was not many

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moments in her company before he was completely subjugated by her charms.

The pale little Muriel looked washed-out and insignificant beside this gorgeous creature. Señor Merello was a masculine edition of his handsome sister: his presence and his wonderful courtly grace of manner seemed but to accentuate her charms.

At dinner we were served by Spanish servants, and a huge negro named Samson stood behind Mrs. Scaiffe's chair. She was in high spirits, drank freely of champagne, and openly alluded to the great discovery.

"You must show us the chart, my friend," she said.

"No!" he answered, in an emphatic voice. He smiled as he spoke and showed his strong, white teeth.

She bent towards him and whispered something. He glanced at Muriel, whose face was deadly white. Then he rose abruptly.

"As regards anything else, command me," he said; "but not the chart."

Mrs. Scaiffe did not press him further. The ladies went into the drawing-room, and by-and-by Digby and I found ourselves returning to London.

During the journey I mentioned to him that Lancaster had wired to say that he would be at his office and prepared for a meeting on Friday. This was Monday night.

"I am glad to hear that the thing will not be delayed much longer," he answered.

On Tuesday I saw nothing of Digby.

On Wednesday evening, when I returned home late, I received the following letter: —

I am not mad. I have heavily bribed the kitchenmaid, the only English woman in the whole house, to post this for me. I was forced to call on Mr. Digby and to engage myself to him at any cost. I am now strictly confined to my room under pretence of illness. In reality I am quite well, but a close prisoner. Mr. Digby dined here again last night and, under the influence of a certain drug introduced into his wine, has given away the whole of his discovery *except* the exact locality.

He is to take supper here late tomorrow night (Thursday) and to bring the chart. If he does, he will never leave The Rosary alive!

The letter was without date, without any heading, and without signature. Nevertheless I was absolutely convinced of its truth. Muriel Scaiffe was not mad — she was a victim. Another victim, in even greater danger, was Oscar Digby. I must save him. I must do what the unhappy girl who was a prisoner in that awful house implored of me.

It was late, nearly midnight, but I knew that I had not a moment to lose. I had a friend, a certain Dr. Garland, who had been police surgeon for the Westminster Division for several years. I went immediately to his house in Eaton Square. As I had expected, he was up, and without any preamble I told him the whole long story of the last few weeks.

Finally, I showed him the letter. He heard me without once interrupt-

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ing. He read the letter without comment. When he folded it up and returned it to me I saw that his keen, clean-shaven face was full of interest. He was silent for several minutes, then he said:

"Leave this matter in my hands. I am going immediately to see Inspector Frost. I will communicate with you directly should anything serious occur."

The next morning I called upon Digby and found him breakfasting at his club. He looked worried, and, when I came in, his greeting was scarcely cordial.

"What a solemn face, Pleydell!" he said. "Is anything wrong?"

"I want you to come out of town with me," I said. "I can take a day off. Shall we both run down to Brighton? We can return in time for our interview with Lancaster tomorrow."

"It is impossible," he answered. "I should like to come with you, but I have a special engagement for tonight."

"Are you going to The Rosary?"

"I am," he replied.

"I wish you would not go," I said. "I do not trust the people."

"Folly, Pleydell. In the old days you used not to be so prejudiced."

"I had not the same cause. Digby, if ever people are trying to get you into their hands, they are those people. Have you not already imparted your secret to them?"

"How do you know?" he exclaimed, springing up and turning crimson.

"Well, can you deny it?"

"I don't know that I want to," he said. "Mrs. Scaiffe and Merello will join me in this matter. There is no reason why things should be kept dark from them."

"But is this fair or honorable to Lancaster? Remember, I have already written fully to him."

"Lancaster cannot object to other wealthy shareholders," was Digby's answer. "Anyhow," he added, laughing uneasily, "I object to being interfered with. Pray understand that, old man, if we are to continue friends; and now by-bye for the present. We meet at eleven o'clock tomorrow at Lancaster's."

His manner gave me no pretext for remaining longer with him, and I returned to my own work. About five o'clock on that same day a telegram was handed to me which ran as follows:

Come here at once. — GARLAND

I left the house, hailed a hansom, and in a quarter of an hour was shown into Garland's study. He was not alone. A rather tall, grey-haired, grey-moustached, middle-aged man was with him. This man was introduced to me as Inspector Frost.

"Now, Pleydell," said Garland, in his quick, incisive way, "listen to me carefully. Time is short. Inspector Frost and I have not ceased our inquiries since you called on me last night. There is the gravest suspicion that Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother, Señor Merello, are employed by a notorious gang in Brazil to force Digby

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to disclose the exact position of the gold mine. We also know for certain that Mrs. Scaiffe is in constant and close communication with some very suspicious people both in London and in Brazil.

"Now, listen. The crisis is to be tonight. Digby is to take supper at The Rosary, and there to give himself absolutely away. He must not go — that is, if we can possibly prevent him. We expect you to do what you can under the circumstances, but as the case is so serious, and as it is more than probable that Digby will not be persuaded, Inspector Frost and myself and a number of men of his division will surround the house as soon as it becomes dark, and if Digby should insist on going in every protection in case of difficulty will be given him. The presence of the police will also insure the capture of Mrs. Scaiffe and her brother."

"You mean," I said, "that you will, if necessary, search the house?"

"Yes."

"But how can you do so without a warrant?"

"We have thought of that," said Garland, with a smile. "A magistrate living at Hampstead has been already communicated with. If necessary, one of our men will ride over to his house and procure the requisite instrument to enforce our entrance."

"Very well," I answered; "then I will go at once to Digby's, but I may as well tell you plainly that I have very little hope of dissuading him."

I drove as fast as I could to my friend's rooms, but was greeted with the information that he had already left and was not expected back until late that evening. This was an unlooked-for blow.

I went to his club — he was not there. I then returned to Dr. Garland.

"I failed to find him," I said. "What can be done? Is it possible that he has already gone to The Rosary?"

"That is scarcely likely," replied Garland, after a pause. "He was invited to supper and according to your poor young friend's letter the time named was late. There is nothing for it but to waylay him on the grounds before he goes in. You will come with us tonight?"

"Certainly," I answered.

Garland and I dined together. At half-past nine we left Eaton Square and, punctually at ten o'clock, the hansom we had taken put us down at one of the roads on the north side of the Heath. The large house which I knew so well loomed black in the moonlight.

The night was cold and fresh. The moon was in its second quarter and was shining brightly. Garland and I passed down the dimly-lit lane beside the wall. A tall, dark figure loomed from the darkness and, as it came forward, I saw it was Inspector Frost.

"Mr. Digby has not arrived yet," he said. "All my men are ready, and at a signal the house will be surrounded; but we must have one last try to prevent his entering it. Come

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this way, please, sir," he added, beckoning to me to follow him.

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the jingling of the bells of a hansom sounded behind us. The cab drew up at the gates and Oscar Digby alighted close to us.

Inspector Frost touched him on the shoulder.

He swung round and recognised me.

"Halloa! Pleydell," he said, in no very cordial accents. "What does this mean? Who is this man?"

"I am a police-officer, Mr. Digby, and I want to speak to you. Mr. Pleydell has asked you not to go into that house. You are, of course, free to do as you like, but I must tell you that you are running into great danger. Be advised by me and go away."

For answer Digby thrust his hand into his breastpocket. He pulled out a note which he gave me.

"Read that, Pleydell," he said; "and receive my answer." I tore the letter from its envelope and read:

Come to me. I am in danger. Do not fail me. — MURIEL.

"A hoax! A forgery!" I could not help crying. "For God's sake, Digby, don't be mad."

"Mad or sane, I go into that house," he said.

He swung himself away from me.

"One word," called the inspector after him. "How long do you expect to remain?"

"Perhaps an hour. I shall be home by midnight."

"And now, sir, please listen. If you are not out of the house by one o'clock, we shall enter with a search warrant."

Digby stood still for a moment, then he walked quickly up the drive. We watched him ring the bell. The door was opened at once by the negro servant. Digby entered. The door closed silently. Inspector Frost gave a low whistle.

"I would not be that man for a good deal," he said.

Garland came up to us both.

"Is the house entirely surrounded, Frost?" I heard him whisper. Frost smiled and waved his hand.

"There is not a space of six feet between man and man," I heard him say; "and now we have nothing to do but to wait and hope for at least an hour and a half. If in an hour's time Mr. Digby does not reappear I shall send a man for the warrant. At one o'clock we enter the house."

Garland and I stood beneath a large fir tree in a dense shade and within the inclosed garden. The minutes seemed to crawl. Our conversation was limited to low whispers at long intervals.

Eleven o'clock chimed on the church clock near by; then half-past sounded on the night air. My ears were strained to catch the expected click of the front door-latch, but it did not come.

At a quarter to twelve the one remaining lighted window on the first floor became suddenly dark. Still there was no sign of Digby.

Midnight chimed.

Frost said a word to Garland and

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disappeared, treading softly. He was absent for more than half an hour. When he returned I heard him say: "I have got it," and he touched his pocket with his hand as he spoke.

The remaining moments went by in intense anxiety, and, just as the deep boom of one o'clock was heard the inspector laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Come along," he whispered.

Some sign, conveyed by a low whistle, passed from him to his men, and I heard the bushes rustle around us.

The next moment we had ascended the steps, and we could hear the deep whirr of the front door bell as Frost pressed the button.

In less time than we had expected we heard the bolts shot back. The door was opened on a chain and a black face appeared at the slit.

"Who are you and what do you want?" said a voice.

"I have called for Mr. Digby," said Frost. "Go and tell him that his friend, Mr. Pleydell, and also Doctor Garland want to see him immediately."

A look of blank surprise came over the negro's face.

"But no one of the name of Digby lives here," he said.

"Mrs. Scaiffe lives here," replied the inspector, "and also a Spanish gentleman of the name of Señor Merello. Tell them that I wish to see them immediately, and that I am a police-officer."

A short conversation was evidently taking place within. The next moment the door was flung open, electric lights sprang into being, and my eyes fell upon Mrs. Scaiffe.

She was dressed with her usual magnificence. She came forward with a stately calm, her large black eyes gleaming.

"Well, Mr. Pleydell," she said, speaking in an easy voice, "what is the reason for this late disturbance?"

Her words were interrupted by Inspector Frost. "Your attitude, madam," he said, "is hopeless. We have all come here with a definite object. Mr. Oscar Digby entered this house at a quarter past ten to-night. From that moment the house has been closely surrounded. He is therefore still here."

"Where is your authority for this intrusion?" she said. Her manner changed, her face grew hard as iron.

The inspector immediately produced his warrant. She glanced over it and uttered a shrill laugh.

"Mr. Digby is not in the house," she said.

She had scarcely spoken before an adjoining door was opened, and Señor Merello, looking gaunt and very white about the face, approached. She looked up at him and said, carelessly:

"Gentlemen, this is my brother, Señor Merello."

The Señor bowed slightly.

"Once more," said Frost, "where is Mr. Digby?"

"I repeat once more," said Mrs. Scaiffe, "that Mr. Digby is not in this house."

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"But we saw him enter at a quarter past ten."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is not here now."

"He could not have gone, for the house has been surrounded since he entered."

"You have your warrant, gentlemen," she said; "look for yourselves."

Frost came up to her.

"I regret to say, madam, that you, this gentleman, and all your servants must consider yourselves under arrest until we find Mr. Oscar Digby."

"That will be forever, then," she replied; "but please yourselves."

My heart beat with sudden terror. What could the woman mean? Digby, either dead or alive, must be in the house!

The operations which followed were conducted rapidly. Mrs. Scaiffe, her brother, two Spanish men-servants, two maids, and the negro who had opened the door to us, were summoned and placed in the charge of a police-sergeant.

Muriel Scaiffe was nowhere to be seen.

Then our search of the house began. The rooms on the ground-floor, consisting of the drawing-room, dining-room, and two other big rooms, were fitted up in quite an everyday manner. We did not take much time going through them.

In the basement, the large cellar had now been fitted up as a laboratory. I gazed at it in astonishment. It was evidently intended for the manufacture of chemicals on an almost commercial scale. All the latest chemical and electrical apparatus were to be found there, as well as several large machines, the purposes of which were not evident. One in particular I specially noticed. It was a big tank with a complicated equipment for the manufacture of liquid air in large quantities.

We had no time to give many thoughts to the laboratory just then. A foreboding sense of ever-increasing fear was upon each and all of us. It was sufficient to see that Digby was not there.

Our search in the upper regions was equally unsuccessful. We were just going downstairs again when Frost drew my attention to a door which we had not yet opened. We went to it and found it locked. Putting our strength to work, Garland and I between us burst it open. Within, we found Muriel crouching by the bed. Her head was buried in her hands. She turned, saw my face, and suddenly clung to me.

"Have you found him? Is he safe?"

"I do not know, my dear," I answered, trying to soothe her. "We are looking for him. God grant us success."

"Did he come to the house? I have been locked in here all day and heavily drugged. I have only just recovered consciousness and scarcely know what I am doing. Is he in the house?"

"He came in, but we haven't found him yet."

She gave a piercing cry and fell unconscious on the floor.

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We placed the unhappy girl on the bed. Garland produced brandy and gave her a few drops; she came to in a couple of minutes and began to moan feebly. We left her, promising to return.

When we reached the hall Frost stood still.

"The man is not here," he muttered.

"But he *is* here," was Garland's incisive answer. "Inspector, you have got to tear the place to pieces."

The latter nodded.

The inspector's orders were given rapidly, and dawn was just breaking when ten policemen, ordered in from outside, began their systematic search of the entire house from roof to basement.

Pick and crowbar were ruthlessly applied, and never have I seen a house in such a mess. Floorings were torn up and rafters cut through. Broken plaster littered the rooms and lay about on the sumptuous furniture. Walls were pierced and bored through. Closets and cupboards were ransacked. The backs of the fireplaces were torn out and the chimneys explored.

Very little was said as our investigation proceeded, and room after room was checked off.

Finally, an exhaustive examination of the basement and cellars completed our search.

"Well, Dr. Garland, are you satisfied?" asked the inspector.

We had gone back to the garden, and Garland was leaning against a tree, his hands thrust in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the ground.

"We must talk sense or we shall all go mad," was Garland's answer. "The thing is absurd, you know. Men don't disappear. Let us work this thing out logically. There are only three planes in space and we know matter is indestructible. If Digby left this house he went up, down, or horizontally. *Up is out of the question.* If he disappeared in a balloon or was shot off the roof he must have been seen by us, for the house was surrounded. *Horizontal disappearance is impossible* — he certainly did not pass through the cordon of men. *He did not go down*, for every cubic foot of basement and cellar has been accounted for, as well as every cubic foot of space in the house.

"So we come to the chemical change of matter — dissipation into gas by heat. There are no furnaces, no ashes, no gas cylinders, nor dynamos, nor carbon points. The time when we lost sight of him to the time of entrance was exactly two hours and three-quarters. There is no way out of it. He is still there."

"He is not there," was the quiet retort of the inspector. "I have sent for the Assistant Commissioner to Scotland Yard, and will ask him to take over the case. It is too much for me."

The tension in all our minds had now reached such a state of strain that we began to fear our own shadows.

Oscar Digby, standing, as it were,

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on the threshold of a very great future, the hero of a legend worthy of old romance, had suddenly and inexplicably vanished. I could not get my reason to believe that he was not still in the house, for there was not the least doubt that he had not come out.

"Is there no secret chamber or secret passage that we have overlooked?" I said, turning to the inspector.

"The walls have been tapped," he replied. "There is not the slightest indication of a hollow. There are no underground passages. The man is not within these walls."

The sound of approaching wheels caused us to turn our heads. A cab drew up at the gates, out of which alighted the well-known form of Sir George Freer.

Garland had already entered the house, and on Sir George appearing on the scene he and I followed him.

We had just advanced across the hall to the room where the members of the household, with the exception of poor Muriel Scaiffe, were still detained, when, to our utter amazement, a long, strange peal of laughter sounded from below. This was followed by another, and again by another. The laughter came from the lips of Garland. We glanced at each other. What on earth did it mean? Together we darted down the stone steps, but before we reached the laboratory another laugh rang out. All hope in me was suddenly changed to a chilling fear, for the laugh was not natural. It had a clanging, metallic sound, without any mirth.

In the center of the room stood Garland. His mouth was twitching and his breath jerked in and out convulsively.

"What is it? What is the matter?" I cried.

He made no reply, but, pointing to a machine with steel blocks, once more broke into a choking, gurgling laugh which made my flesh creep.

Sir George moved swiftly across to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Come, what is all this, Garland?" he said, sternly, though his own face was full of fear.

I knew Garland to be a man of extraordinary self-control, and I could see that he was now holding himself in with all the force at his command.

"It is no use — I cannot tell you," he burst out.

"What — you know what has become of him?"

"Yes."

"You can prove it?"

"Yes."

"Speak out, man."

"He is not here."

"Then where is he?"

Garland flung his hand out towards the Heath, and I saw that the fit was taking him again, but once more he controlled himself. Then he said, in a clear, level voice:

"He is dead, Sir George, and you can never see his body. You cannot hold an inquest, for there is nothing to hold it on. The winds have taken him and scattered him in dust on the

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Heath. Don't look at me like that, Pleydell. I am sane, although it is a wonder we are not all mad over this business. Look and listen."

He pointed to the metal tank.

"I arrived at my present conclusion by a process of elimination," he began. "Into that tank which contained liquid air Digby, gagged and bound, must have been placed violently, probably after he had given away the chart. Death would have been instantaneous, and he would have been frozen into complete solidity in something like forty minutes. The ordinary laboratory experiment is to freeze a rabbit, which can then be powdered into mortar like any other friable stone. The operation here has been the same. It is only a question of size. Remember, we are dealing with 312 deg. below zero Fahrenheit, and then — well, look at this and these."

He pointed to a large machine with steel blocks and to a bench littered with saws, chisels, pestles, and mortars.

"That machine is a stone-breaker," he said. "On the dust adhering to these blocks I found this."

He held up a test tube containing a blue liquid.

"The Guiacum test," he said. "In other words, blood. This fact taken with the facts we already know, that Digby never left the house; that the only other agent of destruction of a body, fire, is out of the question; that this tank is the receptacle of that enormous machine for making liquid air in very large quantities; and, above all, the practical possibility of the operation being conducted by the men who are at present in the house, afford me absolutely conclusive proof as to what happened. The body of that unfortunate man is *as if it had never existed* — without a fragment of pin-point size for identification or evidence. It is beyond the annals of all the crimes that I have ever heard of. What law can help us? Can you hold an inquest on *nothing?* Can you charge a person with murder where no victim or even the most minute trace of a victim can be produced?"

A sickly feeling came over me. Garland's words carried their own conviction, and we knew that we stood in the presence of a horror without a name. Nevertheless, to the police mind horror *per se* does not exist. To them there is always a mystery, a crime, and a solution. That is all. The men beside me were police once more. Sentiment might come later.

"Are there any reporters here?" asked Sir George.

"None," answered Frost.

"Good. Mr. Oscar Digby has disappeared. There is no doubt how. There can, of course, be no arrest, as Dr. Garland has just said. Our official position is this. We suspect that Mr. Digby has been murdered, but the search for the discovery of the body has failed. That is our position."

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Miriam Allen deFord's "Death Sentence" won an Honorable Mention in EQMM's Third Annual Prize Contest. It is a typically ingenious deFord story, which is all the warning we intend to give you — indeed, we may have said too much already . . . We once asked Miss deFord to describe her method of working out detective stories, and her reply was unusually interesting. She plans all her stories in her mind, to the very last detail, before she puts a word on paper. The planning occurs mostly during sleepless hours in bed — Miss deFord suffers from insomnia which is often an occupational disease with writers but which Miss deFord, in the light of her personal system of creating plots, considers a blessing and a boon. So, night after night, perhaps for weeks on end, Miss deFord goes over her story in her mind — over and over and over — watching the characters grow, hearing them speak, dovetailing the events with the most careful precision, changing here, adjusting there, polishing this dialogue, strengthening that motivation — until at last the story is complete. Then, and only then, Miss deFord sits down before her typewriter — and it is no wonder that she seldom writes more than one draft. You might say that Miss deFord's stories are finished before they are begun . . .

DEATH SENTENCE

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

FROM the moment that Al Ravenel came back into his life, Norman Frayne had known that death was the only solution of the problem.

Always he had been one to escape, to retreat, to hide. Never had he felt the impulse toward confrontation or aggression. But this was different. It was obvious that his secret would never be safe while he and Ravenel were both alive.

It had begun with an ordinary phone call in his real estate office in the little New Jersey town. "Frayne speaking," he had said to the receiver. And then his heart had lurched and plummeted as a voice he had never again expected to hear announced cheerfully: "Hi, Norman. This is Al Ravenel. Hold everything; I'm coming right down to see you."

He had found no words to answer; had just sat frozen while the phone clicked off. Finally he had roused himself sufficiently to tell his stenographer to go to lunch early, and to put the "Please come back at 2 o'clock" sign on the counter, while he shut himself into his little private office in back. When, after she had gone, he heard the door open from the street, he had peeped out cautiously.

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It was Ravenel, all right. The black hair was gray now — that was the only observable difference. Frayne's hands were cold as he opened his own door wide. "Come in here, Al," he croaked.

Ravenel stood looking at him, without offering to shake hands. After a minute he laughed — the same laugh that had once so fascinated Frayne, and that now filled him with horror.

"How did you — I thought —" he mumbled miserably.

Ravenel laughed again.

"I haven't broken jail, if that's what you mean. Did you think a life sentence meant forever? Not on a manslaughter charge, you little squirt. I'm free as the air — quits with the State of Missouri. And I came straight to you — how do you like that?"

"How — how did you find me?"

"Easy. Remember Mugs Dorland, at the Home? He got sent up two, three years ago — burglary. We got to chewing the rag, and he told me that while he was in the county jail waiting trial, old Elliot came to see him. Elliot told him he'd seen you in New York — that you're a sort of moral lesson: one of our boys who had been all set to go wrong, just like me and Dorland, and then had straightened out and become a respectable citizen. And he told him where."

It was true. Frayne cursed the day he had run into the old superintendent of the orphanage, in New York for some social workers' convention the very day he was there on business, and the way he had let Mr. Elliot pump him. He was goaded to weak blustering.

"Well, what do you want of me, Al? Nobody's got anything on me."

"No? I took the rap for you, didn't I?"

"I had nothing to do with that — that shooting."

"Sure, not a thing. All I did was save your life. For God's sake, why do you think I shot the guy? He'd just chopped off your finger with that axe, hadn't he? I might have known the night watchman in a lumber yard would be handy with an axe. That was my mistake. Yours was to beat it and leave me holding the bag."

"Al — listen! I was a kid — I was scared to death. I was shocked sick and badly injured — bleeding all over the place."

"Exactly. So they knew I wasn't alone — I wasn't hurt and the old guy didn't bleed much. But I never let you down. I held out that I didn't even know who was with me — just some punk I'd picked up at a street corner to act as lookout. When the people from the Home testified how thick we used to be when we were both kids there — how I'd been leading you astray ever since, of course, hypnotizing you into my evil ways, I suppose — and how you'd left St. Louis and there wasn't a trace of you — I stuck to it that I hadn't seen you for a year, didn't know a thing about you, and that you had had absolutely nothing to do with this affair."

"That was — mighty decent of you, Al."

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"Decent, hell. I guess you've forgotten about me, haven't you, Norman? Old Al Ravenel — the guy who never miscalculates. I knew you through and through, laddiebuck — I ought to. I was as certain then as I am now that you'd had a scare that would put you on the straight and narrow for life. You have a bookkeeper's soul, Frayne. I knew you were going to 'make good' somewhere, as they call it. So I was saving you. You were my meal ticket when my hitch was over. That's what you're going to be now."

Despair stirred Frayne to feeble protest.

"Who's going to take your word for anything, Ravenel? Oh, I grant that you could — you could ruin my life here that I've built up for twenty years. You could kill my business, kill me with my wife, spoil everything for me. But be sensible. In the first place, I'm not worth much to you. Sure, I've got a business, a home, a measly little bank account. But that's no pickings for a man like you.

"And furthermore, as I said, nobody'd believe your word against mine. I built up a past for myself, long ago, when I drifted here and got a job with Paula's old man, and married Paula, and inherited the business. Now an unknown ex-convict strays into town with a fantastic story about me. Paula would just agree with me that you were stir-simple — so would everybody else. They think a lot of me here; I've been a leader in civic enterprises. Everybody knows I stem from an orphanage in St. Louis; all I have to say is that I used to know you there and that you cooked up the rest in your crazy mind. You've got no proof against me."

Ravenel laughed again. Then he said quietly:

"You forget. They have the finger."

Frayne felt physically sick. It all came back to him with unspeakable horror — that nightmare ride in the freight car, the agony, the terror, the tramp who had bound a rough tourniquet and asked no questions, the throbbing, infected hand, the fear that kept him going until he was in Chicago before he dared to take the hand to a hospital with a plausible story, the weeks before they knew they would not have to amputate. The deep scar across his palm stared him in the face. Ravenel was still talking.

"I guess you haven't kept up with modern science, Frayne. They've got a way now of restoring fingerprints, no matter how old the specimen is. They freeze the finger in glycerine and formaldehyde, even when it's too far gone to be photographed from molds. They didn't have your prints in the old days — you never got that far when we were working together. But they'll have them now; everybody's been printed for one thing or another, in the war. All I have to do is notify the authorities in St. Louis."

"It's — it's outlawed," Frayne gasped.

"Not murder, my boy — that's

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never outlawed. And you were an accessory before the fact."

There was a long silence. Then Norman Frayne surrendered. One last whimper came from him.

"You're — you're taking an awful chance. I see it now — I'll never be safe while we're both on earth. If I were in your place, I'd keep away from danger."

Ravenel snorted contemptuously. "Do you think I'm afraid of you? I told you I know you through and through. You haven't the guts to kill a mosquito, let alone a man. Oh, sure, you might try to poison me, or something underhand like that — if you were certain nobody would ever find it out. But I can take care of myself. You'll never get me."

In that instant, from the utter depths of despair, Norman Frayne knew what he must do.

"All right," he said, "what do you want?"

"That's better. Well, first of all, you've got a boarder. I'll give you till tonight to fix a story up with your wife. Then you can come down to the hotel and get me and my things — I haven't got much, naturally. Had to ride the rods east. I'll be moving in this evening.

"What we do next I'll work out later. I guess you'd better take me into partnership with you here. Not for a job, you understand, but for a share of the profits. Unless you want to make it a lump sum, of course — say ten grand."

"You're out of your mind. I haven't got ten thousand dollars in cash in the world. And if I had, how would I explain to Paula? This was her father's business — he left it to us, share and share alike."

"You must have a good insurance policy. You could borrow on that."

"Not without Paula's knowledge — she's beneficiary. And I wouldn't anyway, to save my life. When I die, it will be all she'll have, or most of it. She can't run the business; she'll have to sell it for what she can get."

"O.K. Suit yourself. I'll take it in installments. I'm going now; come for me at the hotel about seven. That will give you time to go home and make up a good story for the missus — and it'd better *be* good. You needn't tell her I'm staying from now on; make it a visit and then we'll stretch it out. But I don't need to tell you what to say — you're good at that kind of thing. Well, so long — see you later."

The door slammed. The whole catastrophe had been over in a quarter of an hour.

"Oh, Norman, you're so *good!* I don't think there's a man in the world with as kind a heart as yours. Of course we'll take the poor fellow in. I feel like crying, when I think of all he's been through. To think of your remembering him all those years, ever since you were two little orphans together! And to think of his having found you now, when he was at the very end of his rope! It's like a miracle."

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Frayne could not talk. He could only kiss Paula, with trembling lips. "I'm not worthy of you, dearest," he managed to murmur at last.

"What nonsense! It's the other way round. Well, now, you run down and get him, and I'll fix up the guest room. I hope he'll stay with us till he's on his feet again."

"He will," said Frayne grimly.

He did. Paula was an angel about it, and Ravenel was too smart not to make himself as little of a nuisance as possible, spending most of his time away from the house. After a few days he began going to the office every day with Frayne, and Paula thought it was wonderful of him to want to help dear Norman. Actually, of course, he spent most of the day hanging around the bars or the town's only poolroom, emerging in time to go home again with Frayne. It kept Frayne busy juggling his books so that Paula wouldn't find out how much of the proceeds of the business were being fed into Ravenel's insatiable pockets.

He had passed along to Ravenel the cover-story he had told Paula, and Ravenel played up to it as best he could — the long series of lost jobs and ruined investments, the mythical invalid wife who had finally died after years of expense and devotion, the pathetic tale of the little son in whom all his father's hopes had been centered and who had died in two days from spinal meningitis, and all the rest of it. It was a good story, and it kept Paula from asking embarrassing questions that might touch on some hidden grief.

But even she rebelled at last, after three months of Ravenel. She was sweet about it; she only said: "I'm ashamed to be such a pig, Norman — but it *was* nice, wasn't it, when it was just us two? We never seem to have any privacy any more — though I'd die before I'd let poor Al know I felt that way."

The next day, in the office, Frayne braced himself for a last appeal.

"Won't *anything* make you call it quits, Al?"

Ravenel laughed.

"Sure — I told you. Ten grand."

"You know that's impossible. Look — go away and I'll send it to you in installments, the way you said before, month by month. I promise you — I'll work it out somehow."

"Nothing doing. How could I live on your 'installments'? Nope, this suits me all right. I'll just take my board-and-keep as interest till I've got my money — all of it."

Frayne said nothing. Ravenel looked at his expression and laughed again.

"You're stuck, my lad," he crowed. "There isn't a bit of hope for you as long as both of us are alive. I know how much you'd like to kill me, never fear. But you'd never dare, you little coward — and even if you could nerve yourself to it, I wouldn't let you. I can watch out for myself."

He sauntered out of the private office with a grin on his face. He winked at Miss Bates, the elderly ste-

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nographer, and when she scowled he chucked her under her plump, indignant chin. Explaining Ravenel to Miss Bates had been one of Frayne's lesser, but more unpleasant, worries.

He couldn't stand much more. It had to be soon. And for Paula's sake it had to be unmistakably, obviously, an accident. No point in saving her from one scandal only to involve her in another; and there were other, more practical considerations too.

Falling out of windows or down stairways was out — too much possibility there of intention and design. No, it must be a homely, commonplace, simple accident. Frayne got hold of a magazine article about the menace of the home. Most accidental deaths, it seemed, took place in the home. The kitchen was the worst place, but that didn't fit the present situation. The bathroom was next. The accident would have to take place in the bathroom.

The Frayne household had settled down to a routine. Norman got up first, as he had always done, bathed and shaved and made breakfast. Now Ravenel was next in line, shaving and bathing while breakfast was cooking. Paula waited till they had gone — she couldn't drift in to breakfast any more in housecoat and slippers, as she used to do when they were alone. Norman had always loved that morning informality — it made him feel the strong, kindly protector who kept the little woman in luxury, even though he knew as soon as he had left the house the little woman washed the breakfast dishes and then went on to do the rest of the housework. It was an added annoyance, another drop in the bucket of his wrath.

Well, it wouldn't be long now. Soon all the annoyances, all the fear and desperation, would be over and done with, forever.

The plan as he finally worked it out was perfect. It could hardly fail — and if by chance it did fail, why, then it would be just an unfortunate accident, for which nobody could possibly be blamed.

He got to the bathroom first every morning. Soap — luckily they used white soap; he wouldn't have to make the slightest suspicious change in anything — thickly rubbed on the bottom of the bathtub. Nobody could help slipping, thrashing out wildly, falling hard. And the soap would dissolve quickly in the warm water. He smiled as he recalled how irritated he had been because when they bought the house there was no shower, and because of the war it had been impossible to have one installed. The tub *had* to be used by all three of them. Ravenel, with his quick self-protective adaptiveness, had learned very soon that in the Frayne family baths were taken every morning.

One thing Frayne had been waiting for was cold weather, cold enough to need the little electric heater in the bathroom. That had given him his first idea. The heater plugged in so that it stood on its little shelf right beside the head of the tub and slightly above it.

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So — there was a choice of two possibilities. You might slip — no matter how cautious you were — and fall heavily, fracturing your skull or at least knocking yourself out, so that your head would be under water. Or, with luck, in falling you might strike the heater so that it would fall in the water; then you would be electrocuted. Three chances of sudden death — and if they all failed, nothing to do but simulate surprise and horror and sympathy. Paula wouldn't even have to simulate them.

He picked the day almost at random — any week day would do. The night before, he couldn't sleep. Over and over he thrashed out every last detail. By his side Paula slumbered peacefully — darling Paula, who would never know. There was nothing in his heart but love for Paula, and complete despair of any other way out, and the final terrible determination of the weak, soft, driven human being. Across the hall, in the guest room, presumably Al Ravenel slept also, the confident, laughing devil who had ruined Norman Frayne's life and driven him, of all men alive, to become a killer.

The alarm did not wake him, for he had not closed his eyes. He turned it off, and — as every morning — drew on his slippers and his bathrobe. Paula turned, looked at him sleepily, and smiled. "Sleep some more, sweetheart, till I call you," he said, and stooped as always to kiss her forehead. He wanted desperately to cling to her, to murmur words of adoration and anguish, to draw from her courage and strength for the dreadful task before him, to give her in turn courage for the shock which must be before her.

But nothing must be different from any other morning; nothing must arouse the faintest suspicion. She was already asleep again when he looked back at her from the door. He could hear Ravenel beginning to stir. He went into the bathroom and shut its door behind him. He plugged in the heater, and like an automaton he began the preparations he had rehearsed so many times.

It was a perfectly devised plan, just as Frayne had known it would be. Everything went through just as he had hoped it would do, and the heater fell exactly right. There was an inquest, of course, but the verdict of accident was a mere expected formality.

Nobody they knew felt anything but sympathy; no one breathed a conjecture or a doubt. Everybody accepted it as an unfortunate accident — the coroner and his jury, their friends and acquaintances and the customers of the real estate office, Paula herself — and Al Ravenel, who left town the night after the inquest.

Nobody ever guessed that Norman Frayne's death was a suicide.

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Your Editor has one advantage over his readers: circumstances sometimes compel us to read certain stories more than once. When we read Margery Allingham's "The Danger Point" for the first time, it did not impress us as being one of her best Mr. Campion short stories; but when the occasion arose for us to reread the story, we realized that it was without doubt one of Miss Allingham's smoothest operations. In some ways it is the most typical of Albert Campion coups: for in "The Danger Point" that 'tec toff, that sleuth-hound swell, who plays the "somewhat peculiar role of Universal Uncle and amateur of crime," performs his usual manhunting miracle under the usual conditions. That is to say, Mr. Campion found himself confronted with two young people in trouble, and when they stood so forlornly in front of him, his heart was touched; and when Mr. Campion's heart went out to a charming young lady-in-distress and to her gallant but ineffectual young knight-in-armor, Mr. Campion nonchalantly "gave them a cocktail and sent them away with the assurance that he would do what he could." The last part — do what he could — is a perfect example, in Campion's case, of British understatement.

THE DANGER POINT

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

MR. ALBERT CAMPION glanced round the dinner table with the very fashionable if somewhat disconcerting mirror top and wondered vaguely why he had been asked, and afterwards, a little wistfully, why he had come.

The Countess of Costigan and Dorn was the last of the great political hostesses, and she took the art seriously.

Sitting at the head of the preposterous table, she murmured witticisms in the ear of the bewildered American on her left in the fine old-fashioned manner born in the reign of the seventh Edward, although the decoration of the room, her gown, and her white coiffure belonged definitely to the day after tomorrow.

Mr. Campion had accepted the invitation to "a little informal dinner" because the great lady happened to be his godmother and he had never ceased to be grateful to her for a certain magnificent fiver which had descended upon him like manna upon the Israelites one hot and sticky half-term in the long-distant past.

At the moment he was a little exhausted. His neighbor, a florid woman in the late forties, talked with an unfailing energy which was paralyzing, but he was relieved to discover that so long as he glanced at her intelligently from time to time

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he could let his mind wander in peace. He observed his fellow-guests with interest.

There were sixteen people present, and Campion, who knew his godmother well enough to realize that she never entertained without a specific object in view, began to suspect that her beloved Cause was in need of extra funds.

Money sat round the table, any amount of money if Campion was any judge. The bewildered American he recognized as a banker, and the lady next to him with the thin neck and the over-bright eyes was the wife of a chain-store proprietor as yet without a title.

Campion's glance flitted round the decorous throng until it came to rest upon a face he knew.

Geoffrey Painter-Dell was still in his late twenties and looked absurdly youthful in spite of a certain strained expression which now sat upon his round, good-natured face. He caught sight of Campion suddenly, and immediately looked so alarmed that the other man was bewildered. His nod was more than merely cool and he turned away at once, leaving Campion startled and a little hurt, since he had known the boy well in the days before that promising youth had acquired the important if somewhat difficult position as Private and Confidential Secretary to one of the most picturesque and erratic personalities of the day, the aged and fabulously wealthy Lady (Cinderella) Lamartine.

That remarkable old woman, famed alike for her sensational gifts to charity, her indiscreet letters to the Press, and her two multi-millionaire husbands, was not present herself, but the fact that her secretary had put in an appearance indicated that the gathering had her blessing, and Campion suspected that his godmother's discreet cadging for the Cause was doing very well.

He returned to Painter-Dell, still puzzled by the young man's lack of friendliness, and caught him staring helplessly across the table. Campion followed his glance and thought he understood.

Miss Petronella Andrews, daughter of the famous Under-Secretary, sat smiling at her neighbor, the brilliant lights shining on her pale arms and on her honey-colored hair; and that neighbor was Leo Seazon.

Campion remembered that there had been rumors of a budding romance between Geoffrey and Petronella, and he quite understood any anxiety the young man might exhibit.

The girl was charming. She was vivacious, modern, and if gossip was to be relied upon, something of a handful. At the moment she merely looked beautiful and youthfully provocative, and Campion wondered, without being in the least old-maidish, if she knew the type of man with whom she was dealing so lightheartedly.

Leo Seazon was bending forward, his distinguished iron-gray head inclined flatteringly towards her.

He was a mature figure, handsome

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in the way that was so fashionable in the last generation and has never ceased to be fascinating to a great number of women. He seemed to be putting himself to considerable trouble to be entertaining, and Campion raised his eyebrows. In his own somewhat peculiar role of Universal Uncle and amateur of crime he had in the past had several opportunities to study the interesting career of Mr. Leo Seazon.

The man was a natural intriguer. He had a finger in every pie and a seat upon the most unlikely boards. His fortune was reputed to be either enormous or non-existent, although his collection of *objets d'art* was known to be considerable. He was a man who turned lightly from jade and water colors to stocks and shares, from publicity to politics. He was also, at the moment, unmarried. It came back to Campion that he had last heard his name mentioned in connection with a certain foreign loan and it occurred to him then that Miss Andrews, and more especially Miss Andrews's family, might be very valuable allies to Mr. Seazon, could the matter be arranged.

He glanced back at Geoffrey with amused compassion. The young man still looked harassed, but now that Campion's interest was thoroughly aroused and he cast a more discerning eye upon him, he saw that his expression had an element of fear in it. Campion was startled. Irritation, alarm, bewilderment at the hideous taste of women in general, all these he could have understood; but wh fright?

It was the florid woman on hi right who answered his question although he did not recognize it a an answer at the time.

"That's the Andrews girl, isn't it?" she murmured, bending a virulently red head towards him. "If she were my daughter I don't think I'd let her run about with that round her little neck."

Campion glanced at Petronella's pearls. As soon as they were pointed out to him he wondered why he had not noticed them before. It may have been that the face above them was sufficiently eye-taking. Now that he did see them, however, as they lay on her cream skin and fell among the draped folds of her pale satin dress, they impressed him.

The necklace consisted of a single string of carefully graduated pearls, with a second and much larger string arranged in scallops from the first so that a curious lace-like effect was produced. It was very distinctive. Campion had never seen anything quite like it before. It was such a sensational piece that even in that opulent gathering he took it to be an example of the decorative jewellery still in fashion. The Andrewses were a wealthy family, but not ridiculously so, and Petronella was very young.

"It looks very pretty to me," he said casually.

"Pretty!" said the woman contemptuously, and he was astonished

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to see that her small dark eyes were glistening.

It was not until afterwards that he remembered that she was Mrs. Adolph Ribbenstein, the wife of the jewel king.

At the moment, however, the conversation was cut short by his godmother, who swept the ladies upstairs to her new white and claret drawing-room on the first floor.

Campion saw Geoffrey watch Petronella follow the others, her white train rustling and the incredible necklace gleaming warmly on her small neck. His eyes were dark and questioning.

Their host, who only seemed to come to shaky life when his wife went out, developed an unexpected flair for interminable political stories, and Campion was unable to get a word with Geoffrey. Moreover, he received the impression that the young man was avoiding him intentionally and his curiosity was piqued.

Seazon, on the other hand, was in excellent form, and although a certain irritation with the elder man might have been excusable in Geoffrey Painter-Dell, now that the girl had gone any interest he might have had in the man seemed to have evaporated entirely, a circumstance which Campion found very odd.

Geoffrey sat with his head bent, his long fingers drumming absent-mindedly on the mirror table, and when at last their host consented to move he was the first guest to rise.

Circumstances were against him, however. As the little party mounted the staircase a servant waylaid him, and when he did come into the drawing-room some minutes after the others he went over to his hostess, who was talking to Campion.

She listened to Geoffrey's worried excuses with gracious tolerance.

"My dear boy," she said, "Cinderella has always been difficult. Run along at once and see what she wants."

Geoffrey grinned helplessly.

"She either wants me to draw up a scheme for a Parrots' Home or ring up the Prime Minister," he said wearily.

The Countess of Costigan laughed.

"Then do it, my dear," she murmured. "She's a very powerful old lady. There aren't many of us left."

She gave him her hand and as he went off turned to Campion with a little grimace.

"Poor boy," she said. "His soul isn't his own. Cinderella's very difficult."

Campion smiled down at her. She was seventy, as keen-witted as a girl and quite as graceful.

"Cinderella?" he said. "It's a queer name."

His godmother raised her eyebrows.

"She adopted it when she was first married, out of compliment to her husband. He was a German prince," she said acidly. "That ought to give you the key to the woman. Still, she's absurdly wealthy, so we must forgive her, I suppose. Albert dear, do go over and talk to Mrs. Hugget.

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That's the thin one in the green dress. Dear me, money doesn't mix well, does it? I asked you and the Andrews girl to grease the wheels a little. I knew you wouldn't mind. Thank you so much, my dear. The one in the green dress."

Mr. Campion went dutifully across the room and passed Geoffrey Painter-Dell as he did so. The young man had paused to speak to Petronella on his way out and had evidently had some little difficulty in detaching her from a resumed conversation with Leo Seazon.

Campion passed by just as the young man was taking his leave and could not help overhearing the last half-whispered words. "Oh, don't play the fool, darling. For God's sake take the damned thing off."

A moment later Geoffrey had gone and Miss Andrews was looking after him, angry color in her cheeks and her eyes blazing. Seazon reclaimed her immediately and Mr. Campion bore down on the lady in green.

The party broke up early. Petronella fluttered away on Seazon's arm and Campion hurried off to see the final curtain of a first night whose leading lady was an old friend of his. But he could not get the odd scrap of conversation which he had overheard out of his mind, and Geoffrey's disinclination to talk to him rankled.

He saw Petronella again as he walked down Bond Street the following afternoon. She was sitting beside Leo Seazon in the back of a gray limousine. They had passed in an instant, but Campion noticed that the girl was not smiling and that Leo was particularly elegant, a poem in spring suiting, in fact. He shook his head over them both, for he had liked the look of Petronella.

His thoughts returned to Geoffrey and his strange appeal to the girl which had annoyed her so unreasonably, but he could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion, and presently he shrugged his lean shoulders.

"Damn the young idiots," he said.

He repeated the observation on the evening of the following day when Superintendent Stanislaus Oates, of the Central Branch of the C.I.D., dropped in to see him in that peculiarly casual fashion which invariably indicated that he had come to glean a little information.

The two men were very old friends, and when Oates was shown into the Piccadilly flat Campion did not bother to rise from his desk, but indicated the cocktail cabinet with his left hand while he added his neat signature to the letter he had been composing with his right.

The superintendent helped himself to a modest whisky and lowered his spare form into an easychair.

"How I hate women," he said feelingly.

"Really?" inquired his host politely. "They haven't invaded the Yard yet, have they?"

"Good Lord, no!" Oates was scandalized. "Ever heard of Lady Lamartine?"

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"Cinderella? I have."

"Seen her?"

"No."

Oates sighed. "Then you haven't the faintest idea," he said. "She has to be seen to be believed. I thought someone told me you knew that secretary of hers pretty well."

"Geoffrey Painter-Dell."

"That's the fellow. Know anything about him?"

"Not much, except that he's a nice lad. His elder brother, who died, was a great friend of mine."

"I see." The superintendent was cautious. "You can't imagine him being mixed up with any funny business? Not even if there were thousands involved?"

"I certainly can't." Campion laughed at the suggestion. "Sorry to disappoint you, old boy, but the Painter-Dells are absolutely beyond suspicion. They're the blood-and-steel brigade, *sans peur et sans reproche* and all that. You're barking up the wrong tree. Geoffrey is as innocent as driven snow and about as excitable."

Mr. Oates seemed relieved. "I practically told her ladyship that," he said, shaking his close-cropped head. "What a woman, Campion! What a woman! She's so darned important too; that's the devil of it. You can't say 'Run along, Grannie, you're wasting the policeman's time.' It's got to be 'Yes, milady, no, milady, I'll do what I can, milady' the whole time. It gives me the pip."

He drank deeply and set down his glass. "She's been at me all day," he said.

Mr. Campion made encouraging noises and presently his visitor continued.

"You were in the States in '31," he said, "and so you don't remember the Lamartine robbery. The house at Richmond was entered and nearly a hundred thousand quids' worth of jewellery was taken. It was her ladyship's own fault, largely. She had no business to have so much stuff, to my mind. No woman of eighty wants a load like that. Well, anyway, it was pinched, as she might have known it would be sooner or later. Fortunately we got most of it back and we put 'Stones' Roberts away for seven years. It was clearly one of his efforts, and we just happened to find him before he'd unloaded the bulk of the stuff."

He paused and Campion nodded comprehendingly.

"Were you in charge?"

"Yes. I was Chief Inspector then, and Sergeant Ralph and I cleaned the affair up as best we could. We didn't get all the stuff, though. There was a thing called La Chatelaine which we never did find. We put 'Stones' through it, but he swore he'd never seen the thing, and we had to let it go. Well, I'd practically forgotten all about it when the old lady sent for me this morning. She made it pretty clear that I'd better come myself if I was Police Commissioner, let alone a poor wretched Super, and the A.C. thought I'd better go. When I got there she was all set for me to

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arrest young Painter-Dell for knowing something about this Chatelaine thing, and I had an almighty job to convince her that she hadn't a thing on the poor chap. I had a talk with him finally, but he wasn't helpful."

Campion grinned.

"You didn't think he would be, did you?"

Oates looked up and his sharp, intelligent eyes were serious.

"There was something funny about the boy," he said.

Campion shook his head. "I don't believe it. The old lady was too much for you."

Still the superintendent did not smile.

"It was nothing *she* said," he insisted. "She simply convinced me that she wasn't quite all there. But when I talked to the lad I couldn't help wondering. He was so frightened, Campion."

At the sound of the word Campion's mind jolted and he remembered Geoffrey's face at the other end of the mirror-topped table. Fear; that had been the inexplicable thing about his expression then.

The superintendent went on talking.

"Lady Lamartine sent for me because her maid told her that Painter-Dell had been asking about the ornament. The robbery took place a couple of years before he took up his appointment. He'd never seen the thing and had never asked about it before, but yesterday he seems to have put the maid through it, making her describe the jewel in detail. The maid told her mistress and her mistress sent for me. I explained that no one could base a charge on anything so slight, and to pacify her I saw the boy. I kid-gloved him, of course, but he was very angry, naturally. He handed in his resignation and the old lady wouldn't accept it. I apologized and so did she. There was a regular old-fashioned to-do, I can tell you. But all the same I didn't understand the boy. He was sullen and quiet, and in my opinion terrified. What d'you know about that?"

Campion was silent for some moments. "La Chatelaine," he said thoughtfully. "It sounds familiar."

Oates shrugged his shoulders. "It's one of these fancy names some jewels get," he explained. "It's a necklace which is supposed to have belonged to one of the French queens, Catherine de Medici, I think. It's an unusual-looking thing, by the photographs. Like this."

He got up and crossing to the desk, scribbled a design on the blotting-paper.

"There's a single string and then another joining it here and there, like lace, see?" he said.

"Dear me," said Campion flatly. "What are the stones?"

"Oh, pearls. Didn't I tell you? Perfectly matched pearls. The finest in the world, I believe. Interested?"

Campion sat staring in front of him, bewilderment settling over him like a mist. In his mind's eye he saw again Miss Petronella Andrews at his

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godmother's dining-table, and round her neck, falling into the soft satin folds at her breast, was, only too evidently, Lady Lamartine's La Chatelaine.

It was then that he repeated under his breath the observation he had made in Bond Street on the morning before.

The superintendent was talking again.

"It's a funny thing that this should come up now," he was saying, "because 'Stones' Roberts came out a fortnight ago and we've lost sight of him. He didn't report last week and we haven't hauled him in yet. I always thought he knew something about those pearls, but we couldn't get a word out of him at the time. Well, I'll be getting along. If you say the Painter-Dell lad is above suspicion I'll believe you, but if you do happen to hear anything, pass it along, won't you?"

Campion came to himself with a start.

"I will, but don't rely on me," he said lightly, and rose to escort his visitor to the door.

He did not put the extraordinary story out of his mind, however, but actually set out that night on a pilgrimage round fashionable London in search of a young lady whom the superintendent would have liked very much to meet. Campion's conscience insisted that he take this step. It had clearly been his duty to tell Oates all he knew and, since he had not, he felt in honor bound to do a certain amount of investigating on his own account. Petronella was not easy to find. She was neither dancing at the Berkeley nor dining at Claridge's. He looked in at the Ballet and did not see her, and it was not until he remembered the Duchess of Monewden's Charity Ball at the Fitzrupert Hotel that he found her, looking like a truculent little ghost and dancing with Leo Seazon.

He caught sight of Geoffrey almost at the same moment and accosted him, demanding an introduction to Miss Andrews. Geoffrey Painter-Dell grew slowly crimson.

"I'm frightfully sorry, Campion," he said awkwardly. "I'm afraid I can't. We — er — we're not speaking. Terribly sorry. Got to rush now. Goodbye."

He retreated in considerable disorder before Campion could murmur his apologies, and disappeared among the throng.

Campion was aware of a growing sense of uneasiness. He had been fond of Geoffrey's elder brother and was genuinely alarmed at the prospect of seeing the young man involved in any sort of mess. He looked about him and espied old Mrs. De Goncourt, who was only too happy to introduce him to her niece. She took him by the arm and waddled happily across the floor with him, annihilated the frowning Mr. Seazon with her magnificent smile, and pounced upon the girl.

"The cleverest man in London, my dear," she said in a stage-whisper which would have carried across

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Drury Lane. "There you are, Albert. Take the child away and dance with her. Ah, Mr. Seazon, you look younger than I do. How on earth do you do it?"

Miss Andrews glanced up at Campion and, although her smile was charming, her gray-blue eyes were very much afraid. He suggested that they should dance, but she hung back.

"I'd like to, but —" she began and glanced nervously at her escort, who was doing his best to extricate himself from the clutches of his redoubtable contemporary.

Campion did not press the matter. He smiled down at the girl.

"I saw you at dinner the other night," he said. "We weren't introduced and I don't suppose you remember me. You're not wearing your beautiful pearls tonight."

She stared at him, and every vestige of color passed out of her face. For a dreadful moment he thought she was going to faint.

"Not very beautiful pearls, I'm afraid." It was Seazon who spoke. He had escaped from Petronella's aunt and now stood, sleek and very angry, a little behind the girl. "Miss Andrews was wearing a pretty little imitation trinket she did me the honor to accept from me. Now, unfortunately, it is broken. She will not wear it again. Shall we dance, my dear? It's a waltz."

He had not been actually rude, but his entire manner had been coldly offensive and there was an old-fashioned element of proprietorship in his attitude towards the girl which Campion saw was resented even while she was grateful to him for his interference.

Campion went home depressed. He liked Geoffrey, had been prepared to like Petronella, and he disliked Mr. Leo Seazon nearly as much as he disapproved of him, which was considerably. Moreover, the mystery of La Chatelaine was becoming acutely interesting.

He had business which took him to the other end of the town the following morning, so that he lunched at his club and returned to his flat a little after three o'clock. His man, who admitted him, mentioned that there were visitors in the study but did not remember their names, so that he went in entirely unprepared and unheralded.

Standing in the middle of his own Persian carpet, clasped in each other's arms with a reckless enthusiasm which could neither be disregarded nor misunderstood, were Petronella Andrews and Geoffrey Painter-Dell. They turned to him as he appeared, but neglected to relinquish hands. Petronella looked as though she had been crying and Geoffrey was still harassed in spite of a certain delirious satisfaction in the back of his eyes.

Campion surveyed them politely.

"How nice of you to call," he said fatuously. "Will you have cocktails?"

Petronella looked at him pathetically.

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"Geoffrey says you can help," she began. "Somebody must do something. It's about those utterly filthy pearls."

"Of course the whole thing is fantastic," put in Geoffrey.

"Paralyzing," murmured Miss Andrews.

Campion restored order. "Let's hear the worst," he suggested.

Geoffrey looked at Petronella and she sniffed in an unladylike and wholly appealing way. She took a deep breath.

"I've got a flat of my own," she began unexpectedly. "It's in Memphis Mews, at the back of Belgrave Square. You see, I've always wanted to have a place of my own, and Mother stood up for me, and after a tremendous lot of trouble we persuaded Father. He said something awful would happen to me and of course he's right, and I am so sick over that. Still, I needn't go into that, need I?"

She gave Campion a starry if somewhat watery smile and he mentally congratulated Geoffrey on the possession of his family's celebrated good taste.

"It begins with the flat, does it?" he inquired.

"It begins with the burglary," said Miss Andrews. "My burglary — the one I had, I mean."

Campion's lean and pleasant face invited further confidence and the girl perched herself on the edge of his desk and poured out her story, while Geoffrey hovered behind her with helpless but adoring anxiety.

"It was last Monday afternoon," she said. "The day of the dinner party. I was out and my maid let a man in who said he was an inspector from the electric light people. She left him in the big room I call my studio and went back to the kitchen. Then she heard a crash and hurried in, to find that he'd pulled my bureau out from the wall, caught the legs on the edge of the carpet, and spilt everything off it onto the floor. She was still scolding him when I came in and then he just fled. Margaret — that's the maid — rang up the electric light company and they said they hadn't sent anyone. That's how we knew he must have been a burglar."

"I see. Did you tell the police?"

"No. He hadn't taken anything. How could I?"

Campion smiled. "It's sometimes just as well," he said. "And then what happened?"

"Then I found the loose board," said Miss Andrews calmly. "I said I'd put the room straight if only Margaret would get some tea, and as I was doing it I found that one of the floorboards, which is usually under the bureau, had been sawn off at some time and put back again. It was very wobbly and I pulled it up. There was an old cigarette tin in the hole underneath and I took it out and put the board back. I thought the tin had been stuffed there to make the board fit, you see.

"It took us some time to get the place straight and then I had to dress. I didn't think of the tin again until

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I was just setting out. Margaret had gone home. I took a last look round, because I do like the place to look tidy when I come in, or it's so depressing, and I saw this dirty old tin on the edge of the carpet. I picked it up to throw it into the wastepaper-basket when I thought it felt heavier than it ought to have done, so I opened it. The pearls were inside in some cotton-wool."

She paused and blushed.

"I suppose I ought not to have worn them," she said, "but I didn't dream they were valuable, and they looked so lovely against my frock. It was natural to try them on and then I hadn't the heart to take them off."

Geoffrey coughed and his eyes sought Campion's appealingly.

"Yes, well, there you are," he said. "I suddenly looked across the table and there they were. I recognized them at once. They're the famous La Chatelaine. The rooms I spend my life in are littered with paintings and photographs of Lady Lamartine wearing them. I knew they'd been stolen and never recovered, and I was pretty nearly bowled over. I realized there'd been some mistake, of course, but I knew how Lady Lamartine felt about her necklace. She's a very — well — impulsive woman, you know, Campion, and I'm afraid I said all the wrong things when I did get a moment with Petronella."

Miss Andrews turned to him with a wholly delightful gesture.

"You were sweet," she said magnanimously. "I was a pig. He just rushed up to me, Mr. Campion, and said, 'Where on earth did you get those things? Who gave them to you? Take them off at once.' I thought he was being a bit possessive, you know, and I was rude. And then of course he had to go. What made it so much worse was that when he 'phoned me early next morning I was still angry. I refused to give him any information and I told him I didn't want to see him again, ever. When he rang up again after that, I was out. I didn't want to talk about the wretched things by that time, you see, naturally."

A puzzled expression passed over Campion's face.

"Why was that?" he inquired.

"Because I'd lost them," said Miss Andrews blissfully. "I lost them that night, the night of the dinner party. They just went. They got warm, you know, as pearls do, and must have slipped off without my noticing it.

"I've been everywhere to look for them. Leo Seazon took me everywhere the next afternoon. We went to the Carados first, and then on to the Spinning Wheel Club in Bellairs Street, and even to the coffee-stall where a crowd of us had some awful tea about four in the morning, but of course nobody remembered seeing them. I daren't advertise and I daren't go to the police because Lady Lamartine is so unreasonable and so difficult, and Geoffrey being her secretary makes it so much worse. You know what she's like. She'll make a

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frightful scandal and think nothing of it. Daddy will never forgive me and it will be ghastly for Geoffrey. What on earth shall I do?"

Campion considered the problem. It was not an easy one. Lady Lamartine was indeed, as even Superintendent Oates was prepared to admit, a very difficult old woman.

"It's all those people," Petronella continued. "All those people at the dinner party and at the Carados afterwards. You see, everybody seems to have recognized the wretched things. Apparently they're famous. The story is bound to go back to Lady Lamartine eventually and, of course," she added thoughtfully "there is Leo Seazon."

Campion avoided Geoffrey's eyes.

"Ah, yes, of course, Seazon," he said casually. "Why did you tell him about it in the first place?"

"I didn't," said Miss Andrews. "He told me. I had no idea what they were until he came out with it. I've met him two or three times lately and he was always very attentive and all that. When we discovered that he was going on to the Carados too, we decided to go together. He seemed quite amusing. He left us at the Spinning Wheel and I didn't think of him again until he 'phoned the next morning and asked if I could see him on 'a private matter of great urgency' — you know how he talks. I told him to come along and when he arrived he started off by asking me in a fatherly fashion if I'd be a good girl and take La Chatelaine to the police."

She took a deep breath.

"I was simply staggered, of course," she said, throwing out a pair of small gloved hands, "but he made me understand what he was talking about at last and I got rather frightened. He put it so badly and he would keep begging me to 'do the sensible thing' and 'own up.' "

"You told him you'd lost the pearls?"

She nodded and her little diamond-shaped face grew grave.

"I'm afraid he didn't believe me," she said. "He didn't believe the story of the cigarette tin either, even when I showed him the loose board."

Geoffrey made an inarticulate sound and she turned to him.

"Oh, he didn't actually say so, of course, darling," she protested. "He pretended to be very helpful. But he did let me see that he didn't really trust me. And now he's come out in the open. He spends hours exhorting me to 'be wise,' to 'trust him,' and not to 'force him to do anything he'd hate to have to do.' "

She looked directly at Campion and he saw that behind her flippancy there was genuine distress in her eyes.

"It's almost a sort of blackmail," she said. "I'm getting to loathe him. I can't move him off the doorstep and I daren't shoo him away in case he goes roaring round to Lady Lamartine. The trouble is I'm afraid he's stewing up to the point where he's going to make an offer to marry me and keep quiet. I can feel that in the wind. I think he rather fancies

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an alliance between the two families."

Geoffrey snorted and Campion intervened.

"Don't you think that's a little old-fashioned and melodramatic?" he ventured gently.

Miss Andrews met his eyes with an unexpectedly forthright glance.

"Leo Seazon is old-fashioned and melodramatic," she said. "He must be nearly seventy."

Campion, who knew that debonair and conceited man to be but fifty-six, felt a sneaking sympathy for Leo Seazon. However, it was not of long duration. Geoffrey took the girl's hand.

"When Petronella rang me up today and poured out the whole story I was beside myself," he said. "Lady Lamartine is on the war-path already. She's heard something. There was a Yard man down there yesterday asking nervous questions. He practically apologized to me for bringing up the subject, but I felt pretty guilty. What can we do, Campion? What on earth can we do?"

Campion made no rash promises. The two young people standing so forlornly in front of him touched his heart, however. He gave them a cocktail and sent them away with the assurance that he would do what he could.

Just before they left, Geoffrey turned to him wistfully.

"About this fellow Seazon," he began diffidently. "I can't pitch him out yet on the street, can I?"

"My dear boy, no!" Campion was mildly scandalized. "I'm afraid Mr. Seazon must be placated at all costs. He's the danger point, you see."

Geoffrey nodded gloomily. "The man's practically ordered Petronella to go to the ballet with him tonight."

"Then she must go," said Mr. Campion firmly. "I'm sorry, but it's imperative. The one thing we must avoid at all costs is publicity, I take it? Mr. Seazon has a devastating tongue."

"Here, but I say . . . !" Geoffrey protested in sudden revolt. "If we're going to accept that premise, Petronella may have to marry the fellow if La Chatelaine doesn't turn up."

Campion's pale eyes were hidden behind his spectacles.

"Let us hope it doesn't come to that," he said solemnly. "Bless you, my children. Let me have your card, Miss Andrews. I'll ring you in the morning."

As soon as his visitors were safely off the premises, Campion sat down at his desk and drew the telephone towards him.

Superintendent Oates was even more helpful than usual. His curiosity was piqued and he listened to the Memphis Mews address with considerable interest.

"Yes," he said, his voice sounding lazier than ever over the wire, "it does strike a note in my memory. That's the place where 'Stones' Roberts's girl lived. Her father was a chauffeur, I remember. They've turned all that Mews into society flats now. What's the excitement?"

Campion did not answer him

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directly. Instead he put another question and once again the Superintendent was helpful.

"It's funny you should ask," he said. "I was just thinking about Roberts when you rang. One of our men reports that there's a fellow very like him acting as a waiter at the Spinning Wheel Club. He couldn't be quite sure and didn't want to frighten him. He wants Ralph or me to go down and identify him."

"Fine." Campion sounded relieved. "That's a real bit of luck. Look here, Oates, do me a favor. Don't pull the man in, but have him tailed. I've got a very good reason for asking."

Oates began to grumble.

"When is your lordship thinking of taking the humble police force into his confidence?" he demanded.

"Right away," said Campion cheerfully. "I'll come round. Oh, Stanislaus, heard from Lady Lamartine today?"

Mr. Oates made a remark which the telephone department would have considered vulgar, and rang off.

Petronella Andrews was entertaining Mr. Leo Seazon to tea when Mr. Campion telephoned to her the following afternoon. She was paler than usual and there were definite signs of strain in her young face. It seemed to her that she had been entertaining Mr. Seazon for several hundreds of years without respite.

He sat, grave and handsome, in the quilted armchair by the fireplace and regarded her with the half-reproachful, half-sympathetic expression which she had grown to hate.

They had been talking, as usual, of La Chatelaine, of Mr. Seazon's considerable fortune, and of the advisability of a young girl having a husband who could protect her in times of trouble.

Petronella had skilfully led the conversation away from the sentimental whenever it had appeared, but it had been growing steadily more and more apparent that his evasion could not last forever, and the telephone call came as a heaven-sent interruption.

Campion was very discreet on the wire.

"Miss Andrews," he said, " do you remember some earrings you lost? No, don't speak; I said earrings. You lost them when your flat was robbed and you told the police. You may not remember all this, but I want you to know it now. Will you come down to Scotland Yard at once and get them? Mr. Seazon is with you, isn't he? Perhaps he'd bring you in his car, which our man reports is outside your door. Don't be alarmed. Just come along. Explain who you are when you arrive and you'll be taken straight up to Superintendent Oates. I shall be there. Goodbye."

An excellent training by a mother of the old school had taught Petronella both self-possession and adroitness, and within half an hour the courtly Mr. Seazon, who was not unadroit himself, was handing her gracefully out of his gray limousine

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in the courtyard of the ugliest building on the Embankment.

The square high-ceilinged room in which Superintendent Oates received them with the avuncular charm he kept for pretty ladies was already half-full of people. Petronella's heart leaped as she caught sight of Geoffrey sitting next to Mr. Campion in a corner, and when he smiled as he rose to greet her she blushed very charmingly.

Mr. Seazon, who observed the incident, did not seem so pleased.

Besides the superintendent there were two other officials present, a thin man in uniform with a box and a fat man in a brown suit with a portfolio. It was very impressive.

Mr. Oates beckoned the thin man, took the box, and smiled encouragingly at the pretty girl.

"Now, Miss," he said.

"My — my earrings?" stammered Petronella.

Oates regarded her blandly.

"A clerical error," he said magnificently. "The necklace, I think. Now would you identify this, please?"

He opened the box with a flourish and took out the shimmering string of loveliness within. La Chatelaine hung over his stubby fingers and glistened like frozen tears in the gray and ugly room. Petronella took them and her face lit up.

"Oh, this is marvelous!" she said. "Oh, bless you! Where did you find them?"

"One moment, Miss." Oates turned to a plump and shining little man who had been sitting unnoticed on the other side of Mr. Campion and who now came forward.

"Yes," he said, taking the string delicately from the girl. "Yes, definitely. I can identify them. This is La Chatelaine. It has been through our hands several times for restringing and so on. We attend to all Lady Lamartine's magnificent collection of jewellery. Dear me, I never thought we should see this in its present lovely state again. You are to be congratulated, superintendent. If these pearls had been separated it would have been a sin, a major sin."

He dropped them back into the cotton-wool with a little gesture which was almost a caress.

Leo Seazon coughed. His face was expressionless but quite composed. He conveyed the impression of a man gallantly concealing a deep disappointment.

"Well, now are you satisfied, my dear?" he murmured. "The necklace goes back to its — ah — rightful owner, I suppose?"

"I am taking the pearls to her ladyship tonight personally, sir," said Oates. "She'll be very glad to see them."

"I have no doubt of that," said Seazon drily and a little unpleasantly, but Petronella silenced him.

"How did you get them?" she demanded.

The superintendent smiled.

"Police methods," he said airily, avoiding Campion's eyes. "The crook who performed the robbery in the

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first place was arrested and sent to jail. That was nearly seven years ago. We recovered practically everything he had had his hands on except the pearls. He'd hidden those in a place we didn't think of searching, under a floorboard in his young lady's father's flat. He didn't even trust her and the family left while he was in jail, so that when he came out and went back for his swag, he found the place had been done up and turned into fashionable little residences. As soon as he was certain he was not being watched, he made an attempt to get into the flat by telling the maid there that he was from the electric light company, but he was disturbed and went off without finding out if his cache was still undiscovered. At this time he was working as a waiter at the Spinning Wheel Club in the West End and the same evening he saw a guest come in wearing the very necklace he was after."

Oates paused and a laugh of pure relief escaped Petronella.

"And so he stole them again?" she said. "Oh, how wonderful! Oh, Geoffrey!"

Leo Seazon watched the young man go over to her and his round dark eyes were not pleasant.

"Very interesting," he said briefly. "It'll make a delightful story. I must add it to my repertoire."

There was a moment of silence. The young people stared at him in consternation and Petronella put out her hand.

"You wouldn't," she said huskily.

"Oh, you wouldn't?"

He regarded her coldly.

"My dear child, I don't see why not," he said drily and turned towards the door.

Campion rose.

"I say, don't go," he murmured affably. "Hear the rest of the story, since it interests you. Our Mr. Roberts, the original crook, didn't steal La Chatelaine *in* the Spinning Wheel."

Leo Seazon swung round slowly and Campion went on, still in the light and pleasant tone that his enemies disliked so much.

"Oh, no," he said. "Our Mr. Roberts, Mr. 'Stones' Roberts, merely saw the jewels at the club. He followed them and found it impractical to attempt to recover them that night. He hung about long enough to see where they were hidden, however, and made his plans to steal them. Unfortunately for him he took so long reconnoitering that by the time he made his successful attempt last night he had a couple of policemen on his tail. They caught him just as he was coming out of the house with La Chatelaine in his pocket. It was a 'fair cop,' as he said himself. Does that improve the story, Mr. Seazon?"

The handsome man with the distinguished iron-gray curls attempted to bluster, but his face was haggard.

"I don't understand your inference," he began.

"Don't you?" said Campion. "Oh, well, then, you're going to get a jolly surprise as well, because the house

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from which Mr. Roberts took La Chatelaine last night was your house, Mr. Seazon, and Mr. Roberts, in the statement which he has made to the police, distinctly says that he followed you home after seeing you slip the necklace off Miss Andrews's shoulders as you were helping her off with her evening cloak in the Spinning Wheel. It may be a lie, as I see you are about to suggest, but he was coming out of your house when he was taken with the pearls on him and he has described the drawer in the desk in your study from which he says he took them."

"Ridiculous! Why should I steal? I'm a rich man." Mr. Seazon's voice was not too steady.

Campion looked at Miss Andrews.

"There's a frightfully trite old saying about wealth not being able to buy one everything one wants," he said. "Well, there you are. I've said my piece. It's up to Miss Andrews to prosecute."

Petronella turned a pale, horrified face from her erstwhile admirer.

"I won't. I won't, of course, if only he doesn't *talk*," she said.

Campion held open the door to the retreating Leo Seazon.

"He won't, I'm sure," he said clearly. "But if he should, well, you can always change your mind, can't you? It remains at your discretion, my children."

In the background Oates chuckled.

"Lay you six to four he don't send you two a wedding present," he said.

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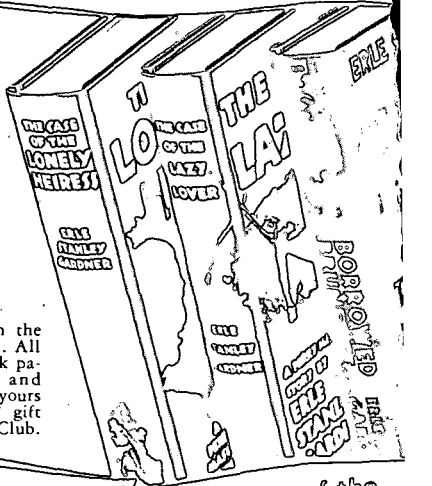
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